

Success factors for public engagement¹

Define your own purpose, goals and objectives for the public engagement process, including what you will do with the information obtained. Examples of desired outcomes for public participation identified in federal agency guidance documents² are:

1. Better decisions
2. Increased agency understanding of the effects of various courses of action, including new alternatives
3. Fairer decisions
4. Increased trust and legitimacy
5. Improved public understanding of the issue
6. Reduced conflict
7. Reduced cost, less delay
8. Improved capacity of participants to engage effectively in governance

Start public participation early in the analysis and decision making process.

Establish and state a clear timeline – when you will interact with the public, when information from the discussion will be reviewed and when decisions will be made or other actions taken based on this information.

Assure that the design of the process, your role and commitment, and the ground rules are clearly stated to the public. What is being requested – for example, are people being asked only to state what they think, or is there an open question on which they can engage in discussion with decision makers? What use will be made of the participants' comments? What areas will not be open to discussion?

Consider whom you want to engage, and think about the process from their standpoint – why would they want to invest time in a discussion? A discussion that could influence a decision is more likely to stimulate participation than a chance to receive information.

Choose a topic that will appeal to those you want to engage, and one that can be presented understandably and impartially. Depending on your audience, “Preventing Whooping Cough” may work better than “Risks with Pertussis Vaccine.” The first example is stated positively and in “lay” language; it also encourages a focus on a broader topic, rather than simply vaccine risks.

If the process is presented as an open discussion, be prepared to involve people on all sides of issues, and to present clearly-marked materials that give opposing views.

Identify the experts and staff who will receive the results of the discussion and your later deliberations; involve them both in planning and in the public engagement event.

Plan messages and strategies for experts who will interact with the public; include tips on responses to criticism or anger, and how to avoid appearing to “sell” rather than discuss.

Plan how to analyze and make use of the information from the discussion.

Plan to let participants know what use has been made of the discussion.

¹ Prepared for the Deliberative Democracy Consortium by Information Renaissance.

² This list was developed as part of a study in progress: National Research Council Panel on Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making, Workshop February 3 – 5, 2005, http://qp.nas.edu/QuickPlace/publicparticipation/Main.nsf/h_Toc/2833733C03C2C1AB85256F9600703AEB/?OpenDocument