

Consulting with Citizens

Author : Whitney Afonso

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Consultation is a different beast altogether than information sharing. Whereas information sharing is a one way relationship, consultation creates a two way relationship based on citizen feedback. It relies on a fundamental assumption by local leaders that citizen feedback is beneficial to the budget process and decision making (often with regard to expenditures or even tax rate setting). This method provides for and encourages citizen input while still allowing local leaders to define the agenda. The key is that practitioners and elected officials solicit input a set of issues and questions that they create and control.



**KEEP
CALM
HERE'S
THE
AGENDA**

The fact that government officials still retain control over the agenda is the primary difference between consultation and the final type of engagement, active participation. Within consultation

officials have identified key areas they would like feedback on and it will still involve information sharing in almost all cases. Officials will set the stage, define the question and the background needed to understand the issue, and then solicit feedback on a (typically) limited element of the problem.

[youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_zknCszY58?rel=0&w=560&h=315]

A typical example of consultation is providing citizens with venues (such as public hearings and town hall meetings) where information is shared and citizens are given opportunities to give leaders their opinions and suggestions. An additional benefit, beyond information sharing, is that this method requires limited time and money on the part of the local government. Aspects of this form, like town halls and hearings, align with practitioners and elected officials, but generally this is closer to the practitioner view of citizen engagement where they are looking to inform and create community liaisons. Once again, like information sharing, a form of consultation is required by state law. There must be a budget hearing where the proposed budget is presented and citizens have the opportunity to comment on it. While the scope of these budget hearings is often the entire budget, there are often specific issues that citizens will be more interested in and that officials will be more interested in explaining, discussing, and receiving feedback on.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from our neighbors to the north. [Fairfax County, Virginia asked its citizens to create a better budget a few years ago](#). Citizens were able to change key spending areas (with an increase or decrease) and then were asked to balance it either through cuts (because let's be honest, most people have some key areas they think deserve more money) or tax increases. It was a great tool for information sharing and for consultation. Why consultation? Because if citizen's chose to share their choices with the county, then county officials had a lot of information about citizen priorities and preferences!

While this process can be very informational for local leaders, they should be aware that they will likely still hear from a segment of the population that may not be representative of the population as a whole. Therefore leaders need to balance what they hear with what they believe are the needs of the greater population. Establishing this balance is no easy task and requires dedication by elected officials and practitioners. This is one reason I advocated for using a multitude of methods to reach and engage with citizens in an earlier blog. If you are relying heavily on hearings and those occur on weeknights people who work evening shifts or have lower access to transportation may not be able to go. Similarly, parents of young children may also find it difficult to attend evening meetings. This is one reason for the growing use of electronic engagement which overcomes many of these hurdles since computers and smart phones are becoming more universal, but there are still issues of language barriers, access, to name a few. And once again this is implying that there is equal interest across groups in engaging, which is unlikely in most communities. So it is not just about providing access, but being mindful of the voices you are hearing and those you are not. Once again, this could be with regard to income, race, gender, language, age, political leanings, etc. It is a complicated puzzle, but an important one to be mindful

of.



Another caution with regard to consultation is it is ill-advised to solicit input from citizens if there is no really intention to use it. It makes the process more frustrating for citizens and it may even cause them to lose faith in their government. Beyond that it is a waste of both government and citizen resources.

