

LEARNINGS FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

PART 1: NEW BEGINNINGS AND TRUST



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This is the first in what will hopefully be a series of articles on what I have learned from leading civic engagement and public consultation processes. This article will explore the purpose and one of the core principles of authentic engagement, trust. I will continue in following articles to discuss the remaining principles, the roles involved, our organising concept and a strategic design framework our team has developed here in Nova Scotia.

This is not simple work. It takes courage to stand in the maelstrom of many pressures, opinions and agendas and keep following the inner clarity of one's integrity. I have chosen to work in this field for a while because I find I learn a huge amount about myself and along the way we get to have a try at healing one of the most critical fragmentations in our society: the breakdown of trust between those who make decisions and those who are affected by them. I hope you enjoy and find useful what I have written. It has helped me to write it.

New beginnings

This is the age of participation. The life cycle of command and control, centralised, hierarchical leadership is sunsetting as our default problem-solving paradigm. Our current reality is too rapidly changing, diverse and information saturated for small groups of leaders or experts to make decisions that can effectively meet the needs of large numbers of people. When you throw in economic and environmental uncertainty and the social unrest we are experiencing all over the world, it becomes even more apparent that our dominant culture of leadership must shift to meet the needs of the people and the times we are living in. We need leaders that build relationships and trust rather than fragmentation and fear.



This change in leadership mindset and practice is already underway. Thirteen years ago I was lucky enough to be part of the founding of the Art of Hosting training and community. This has become a global network of practitioners with hundreds of trainings happening all over the world every year. We have moved from being on the fringe to now being part of multiple large scale mainstream transformation projects in all sectors world wide. The Art of Hosting is about applying participatory leadership to some of the most overwhelming challenges of our times. Rather than calling the experts to solve our problems the Art of Hosting offers a suite of mental models, methods and personal practices to bring together all those affected by a situation into conversation to find a way forward everyone owns and is ready to act upon.

I have been working with participatory leadership for many years but it is only in the last few years that I have begun to see civic engagement as a key leverage area for positive social change. It began in a conversation with a leader from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation at an Art of Hosting training in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He told me the story of how, for fifteen years, scientists have been attempting to discover the core protein at the heart of the AIDS virus. In an attempt to accelerate the process, the Gates foundation funded an online game where people from all over the world were able to participate in the research. It took only 3 weeks for the core protein to be identified. During the same period, I was hearing stories of companies that outsourced their research to public forums and made massive advances in their business development and huge growth in their profits.

I realised that my work of hosting was ready to take a next step. It was time to combine the expertise I had developed in participatory process design with the knowledge of leaders in other fields of collaboration such as gaming, social media, design thinking and street engagement. We could create products for societal transformation together that none of us could design alone. This massively influenced how my team and I delivered our first civic engagement for the New Halifax Public Library, combining participatory events, creative street engagement and online interactive platforms to coherently surface public voice to influence decision makers. Big questions began to form as I considered the future of this type of work:

*What if we could authentically make visible the collective voice of people from across a city, region or nation?
How could we make that collective voice visible in such a way it would transform public realm conversation?
What would it mean to strategically direct that voice to impact political platforms, the economic elite and civil society leaders?*

How would the capacity to authentically make visible public voice through civic engagement transform the very nature of modern democracy?

The purpose of civic engagement and public consultation

These founding questions have lead me to re-examine previous work in a new light and deliberately seek out and accept work that has civic engagement at its core. Some of this work has included the transformation of Nova Scotia Public Health through multiple citizen and stakeholder events, public engagement for major developments like the Nova Centre in Halifax and societal projects such as AuditFutures in the UK.

When I talk to potential clients and partners about an engagement process I say the purpose is:

“A highly responsive and participatory interface between the caller(s), the stakeholders and the public”.

This is about thinning the gap between those who make decisions and those who are affected by them. It is about designing processes, platforms and portals for information to move swiftly and effectively. Decision makers are then able to integrate the needs and desires of the public and stakeholders into their planning. In turn, the public and stakeholders are able to access important information that supports and transforms conversations in the public realm and elsewhere. The more effectively decision makers can respond to real needs, the more they build trust and credibility and the more we all end up with a product, service, building or strategy we are happy with. Equally, the more informed the public and stakeholder debate becomes the less room there is for ungrounded assumptions to take over from the actual content. It is all too often that



The combination of street engagement, participatory events and online platforms is a potent force for surfacing public voice across regions.

engagement is hijacked by hype or lobbyists and the public loses the opportunity to influence and change the content that is actually on the table. It has been a remarkable transformation for government leaders and private sector developers to realise that they can come out of a public engagement process looking good. It has also been inspiring to see citizens faith in their capacity to influence change grow as engagement processes unfold.

This is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential of this work. I articulate the purpose of engagement to myself as:

“To make visible the collective intelligence of a region in such a way that it transforms civic culture and leadership platforms ... so that the directionality of society is re-located into the hands of citizens”.

If this is the age of participation and centralised, isolated decision making is no longer effective, then we must explore alternatives. I believe we are on the cusp of having the processes and technologies to be able to surface the patterns of public opinion in such a way that it can become the compass for how decisions are made. This for me is the exciting potential of public engagement work. It has embedded in its DNA a fundamental shift in leadership from the cult of the charismatic individual, to society being driven by the collective voice of its people. This is a fundamental re-location of power to where it belongs. Authentic engagement builds by default a civic culture of collaborative problem solving where people step up to solve their own problems. Leadership becomes more about creating the conditions for people’s success rather than telling people what success looks like. If we can amplify the small success we are having now in surfacing public voice I feel there is potential to transform modern democracy through how it engages its citizens. Now that is a long term purpose I am ready to work for.

The principles and conditions that create authentic civic engagement

There are twelve core principles we have learned that need to be in place and clear to all the key people involved in public engagement work. If these are not tended to, the quality of the engagement begins to dip and the credibility of the work can become undermined. These have all arisen through doing the work and learning along the way with a dedicated team of entrepreneurs and change agents:

- Build trust
- Make visible the full spectrum of opinion and perspective
- Engage a broad and diverse demographic and geography
- Listen for recurring patterns that are reflective of the collective intelligence
- Integrate expert input, interactive conversations, arts, social media and tangible experience
- Build community and raise civic pride
- Be responsive to what is happening in the community, online and what is in the media
- The proof is in the pudding: people must see themselves in the results
- Create compelling messaging, invitation and branding
- Share the necessary information for informed public debate
- Honesty, transparency and authenticity at all levels
- Create just enough order for the inevitable chaos to be meaningful and productive

I began this article thinking I could go through all of these principles (citing examples) and then move onto what we have learned about the people needed, the process design and the strategy involved. The more I wrote, the more I realised I had to say. I was writing a book not an article! For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to focus on the core principle that I think knits it all together, the societal acupuncture point of civic engagement work: trust.

Whatever we do in our engagement work has to build trust and not further erode it. I have been working locally and internationally in the field of systems change for the last thirteen years. There has been a recurring theme in the work: the fundamental breakdown of trust between decision makers and those affected by their decisions, whether that be in our political systems, corporate structures or civil society initiatives. I believe the healing of this rift is at the heart of building more inclusive, relevant and resilient democracies.

However, the history of engagement has been so riddled with badly run process and manipulated information sharing that not only has citizen trust in decision makers broken down (and vica versa) but the faith in the process of civic engagement itself has been undermined. Any action we take must re-build this trust in each other and the process of engagement or it is not worth doing.



Events reflect community they are part of: music, children, good conversation space and we always make sure people's voice is visible in the room.

Build trust at the core

Trust has to be practised at the core of the project. The quality of trust and relationship among the core players in the project will play out across the public engagement as a whole. The nature of civic engagement work is that it is inherently unpredictable. When chaos strikes, because it inevitably will, if there are not solid trusting relationships at the centre of the project it will begin to come apart at the seams. Strategic alliance is not enough to run a good engagement.

When my team and I were deciding if we would go ahead with the Nova Centre engagements in Halifax I met with the developer and we began to discuss possibilities. The entrepreneur in me began to get very excited at the potential for us to take our work to a next level and the positive impact we could have on the downtown and the culture of conversation in our city. I left the meeting with my head buzzing with ideas and pulled together a first draft of the engagement plan. There was solid government partnership at all three levels, he was willing to give us the freedom to do our work and there was a budget enough to make it possible for me to bring my full team. Then my doubts began to kick in: I hardly knew this man, maybe they were just giving us enough rope to hang ourselves, was I a pawn in a bigger political game?

My reputation as someone to be trusted in hosting civic engagement is only good if I am able to stand between the public and the decision makers and host the relationship and information exchange impartially. As soon as I become aligned with any one person or group I lose the credibility to bring everyone together. I remembered how transformative it was for me when the architect of the Halifax Library said “for the first time in my career of designing public buildings, the public became my client”. The next time I met with the Nova Centre developer, a couple of things happened which gave me the confidence to proceed with the project.

We began our meeting with a very candid conversation. I told him that my reputation and future in this work was dependent on his capacity to deliver in response to public input. What builds trust in a decision maker, a process and an engagement facilitator is when people see their collective opinions reflected in the results. He looked me right in the eye and assured me that he wanted us all to come out of this with our reputations and integrity intact. I felt his sincerity, these were not just words to be spoken but something he believed. I could also see this reflected in the team he had around him. They all trusted each other as friends. This gave me the confidence that he knew how to be in trusting relationship to me and by extension to the public. If I had not felt this kind of clarity I would not have proceeded, no matter how tempting the opportunity.

Secondly, we talked about the contract and who was my client. We named both of the sponsors of the engagement, the developer and the government, and we also named the public as my clients. Contractually now I was bound to serve all the key stakeholders equally. This was the first time I had been able to make the public part of the written contractual agreement for public engagement work. It spoke to me of the developers willingness to trust my team, our process and the public voice. True to his word the developer completely re-designed his building based on the ongoing outcomes of the 6 month public engagement, scrapping previous designs from earlier in the project.

I cannot move on from this section without acknowledging the incredible quality of relationships among my team. The friendships we had built over previous projects gave us the ground to withstand the initial public storm of this work. It reinforced for me that the only way to sustain social innovation is by working with people you trust, anything less cannot withstand the pressure of tensions, speed of learning and exhilaration of success without become a battleground for egos.

The combination of trust with the developer, within my team and with government decision makers created a deep and strong foundation for our work. Without these relationships I do not believe we would have been able to so successfully navigate the unfolding complexity of this project.

Build trust in the process

Part of the complexity of the Nova Centre engagements was the controversial nature of the development. Many people did not want to see it built, disagreed with the inclusion of a publicly funded convention centre and were very vocal about this online and in the media. We knew we could not ignore this and were ready to invite and engage all voices in the conversation.

Our first public event was billed as a ‘Town Hall’ and had been advertised around the question of “Nova Centre: Where are you at, Halifax?”. Inspired by stories from Greece, we put a microphone in the middle of the room, surrounded by concentric circles and gave each speaker a maximum of three minutes. It was a

two hour session with an opening from a first nations elder, followed three blocks of ten speakers and some closing remarks from the developer. It was a simple process that set the tone for the whole engagement. Multiple perspectives were heard and most importantly it became clear that all voices were invited, welcome and could have impact. After this we moved into a series of events working with the World Cafe around the vision for the overall look and feel of the building, design of the public spaces and the Convention Centre. We never shied away from controversy when it arose and always integrated it into our meetings as part of the conversation.

The only way we could credibly stand up and say we had run a good engagement is if we reached out and engaged as many perspectives as possible. It is only through the contribution of multiple points of view that we are able to piece together a bigger picture of public opinion. People I work with are often very worried about this approach feeling like the events will be hijacked or dominated by nay sayers. In the face of a hot topic the natural reaction is to contract and try to control the engagement. In reality this just creates a clearer target and reinforces the cynics perception of an untrusting process. My experience has been that the more we broaden the invitation to engage, the less it is possible for any one viewpoint or group to dominate the engagement. The more we honestly make visible all the different opinions the more we build trust in the process. People start to turn up ready and willing to fully engage. Citizens, as well as decision makers, are tired of public events which are dominated by individual ranters that eclipse the broader public opinion.

As a result of the engagement process, the public saw major changes to the Nova Centre integrated into the design such as: shifting of parking entrances off a busy entertainment street, an accessible green roof, all season outdoor performance space and more. The patterns of public opinion were constantly reflected back into the public realm throughout the process. We used art and information on the fences, online downloadable summaries and video, social media feeds and posts and street based outreach activities. People saw the design evolve in response to what they were saying. This built trust in the process and created a turn around in public opinion on the building and the decision makers involved.

The Nova Centre public engagement is one example of good process leading to good results. It led our community from a place of doubt and skepticism to one of shared trust and collaborative city building. Together, the public shaped the Nova Centre. The process has demonstrated the clear value of citizen participation in the decisions and initiatives that impact them. Just like the developer said:

“This is a better project than we had before we embarked on the consultation.”



Looking ahead

My greatest hope is that civic engagement projects, such as the Nova Centre and the Halifax Central Library, move us closer to healing the fragmented relationships between our decision makers and those most affected by their decisions. That they further the culture of civic conversation across our region and create powerful stories of how the courage to trust can lead to concrete visible change around us. This is work that is local in its action but global in its consequences. Authentic engagement is proved, one project at a time, as a source of good governance and business practice. Every project is a brick in the foundation of a participatory democracy that is rooted in the needs of its people, rather than the egos of isolated leaders.

Ultimately, the civic engagement work has had important learnings for me as a host and facilitator of process. I believe the complexity and uncertainty of these times demands we bring together multiple diverse perspectives to work on the major issues facing us in and among our communities, organisations and nations. The role of the host or facilitator is to create the conditions for all these perspectives to come together, build relationships and surface clarity and strategy that transcends and includes all viewpoints. This is the type of leadership that is at the centre of facilitating civic engagement projects.

If I am willing to step into this role I must let go of outcome and allegiance to any cause or perspective. Attachment to a particular result limits the reality of what is actually happening among people and therefore my capacity to respond meaningfully. Alignment with any particular cause or perspective undermines my capacity to facilitate the conversation impartially for all the different people involved. As soon as I take a stand for one perspective I have lost the trust of the others to host a good conversation. My experience is that this takes an incredible commitment to letting go and being in the moment. I am constantly challenged to shed my ideas of what is right and wrong and be with what is. This is a practise of personal trust in myself and in people's inherent goodness and wisdom.

I believe this is true, not just for facilitators but for anyone interested in leading change. The very nature of change, innovation and transformation is that you do not know the outcome is ahead of time. The only way I have found to be in this kind of unknowing is to be with people I trust. If I am in relationships of trust, I am learning, and if I am learning, life has meaning and impetus into action. Life itself becomes vibrant. It is the trust in our personal relationships that create results we can trust in the world. I think Thomas Merton says it best:

"Do not depend on the hope of results ... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself ... you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people ... In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything" Thomas Merton

No matter how grand the vision and broad the scope of my work it always leads me within myself and to the quality of relationships I have with others. Perhaps it is the grandness of the vision that needs to be surrendered in order to give fully to the work and the people in the moment.

What am I willing to let go of to be in the truth of the work itself and relationships of trust with others?