

# CORE PRINCIPLES *for Public Engagement*

*Developed collaboratively by members of leading public engagement organizations.*

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There are many ways government officials and community leaders can engage the public around the myriad issues that affect people's lives. It is our stance that quality public engagement must take into consideration seven core principles if it is to effectively build mutual understanding, meaningfully affect policy development, and inspire collaborative action among citizens and institutions.

The following seven principles overlap and reinforce each other in practice. They serve both as ideals to pursue and as criteria for judging quality. Rather than promoting partisan agendas, the implementation of these principles generates authentic engagement in public problem-solving.

## **The Seven Core Principles**

*These principles are detailed on the following pages.*

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1. **Preparation** - Plan, design, and convene the engagement in accordance with the other six principles.
2. **Inclusion** - Incorporate multiple voices and ideas to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.
3. **Collaboration** - Support organizers, participants, and those engaged in follow-up to work well together for the common good.
4. **Learning** - Help participants listen, explore and learn without predetermined outcomes -- and evaluate for lessons.
5. **Transparency** - Promote openness and provide a public record of the people, resources, and events involved.
6. **Impact** - Ensure each participatory effort has the potential to make a difference.
7. **Sustainability** - Promote a culture of participation by supporting programs and institutions that sustain quality public engagement.

## 1. PREPARATION

*Plan, design, and convene the engagement in accordance with the other six principles.*

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**At its best:** Participation begins when stakeholders, convenors and process experts engage together in the planning and organizing process. Their unique context and aims shape the process design as well as venue selection and set-up. They create hospitable, accessible, functional environments and schedules that serve the participants' logistical, intellectual, biological, aesthetic, identity, and cultural needs. In general, they promote conditions that support all the qualities on this list.

**What to avoid:** Untrained, inexperienced, or ideologically biased organizers design programs that do not fit the purpose of the effort or the community involved, or that do not respect and engage the relevant stakeholders. The venue is inaccessible, ugly, and confusing, and the poorly constructed schedule is inflexible or rushed, with inadequate time for doing what needs to be done. Facilitation is weak or too directive, interfering with people's ability to communicate with each other openly, adjust their stances, and make progress. Logistical, class, racial, and cultural barriers to participation are left unaddressed, effectively sidelining marginalized people and further privileging elites, majorities, "experts", and partisan advocates.

## 2. INCLUSION

*Incorporate multiple voices and ideas to lay the groundwork for quality outcomes and democratic legitimacy.*

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**At its best:** Convenors and participants reflect the range of stakeholder or demographic diversity on the issue at hand. Alternatively, participants are randomly selected to represent a microcosm of the public. Participants have the opportunity to grapple with data and perspectives that fairly represent different "sides" of the issue. Participants feel they are respected and their views are welcomed, heard, and responded to. Special effort is made to enable normally marginalized, silent, or dissenting voices to meaningfully engage -- and fundamental differences are clarified and honored.

**What to avoid:** Participants are mostly "the usual suspects" -- perhaps with merely token diversity added. Biased information is presented, and expert testimony seems designed to move people in a specific direction. People have little chance to speak out and, when they do, there is little sign they are actually heard. Participants, stakeholders, or segments of the public feel their interests, concerns and ideas -- and they, themselves, as people -- are suppressed, ignored, or marginalized.

### 3. COLLABORATION

*Support organizers, participants, and those engaged in follow-up to work well together for the common good.*

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**At its best:** Organizers involve public officials, “ordinary people”, community leaders, and other interested parties as equal participants in conversations where differences are explored rather than ignored, and a shared sense of a desired future can emerge. People with different backgrounds and ideologies work together on every aspect of the engagement -- from planning and recruiting, to gathering and presenting information, all the way through to presenting outcomes and implementing agreed-upon action steps.

**What to avoid:** Unresponsive power-holders deliver one-way pronouncements or preside over adversarial, disrespectful or stilted conversations. Experts and authorities feel they already have “all the answers” and “listen” only to appease. Engagement has no chance of impacting policy because relevant decisions have already been made or are in the pipeline, or because those in power are not involved or committed. Loud voices, mainstream views, or suppressive “reason” dominate, and other voices and modes of expression are silenced or tolerated. Engagement feels pointless, lacking shared purpose and a link to action.

### 4. LEARNING

*Help participants listen, explore and learn without predetermined outcomes -- and evaluate for lessons.*

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**At its best:** Skilled facilitators encourage everyone involved to share their views, listen, and be willing to be curious in order to learn things about themselves, each other, and the issues before them. Shared intention and powerful questions guide participants' exploration of useful information and their own disagreements in an open and respectful atmosphere. This exploratory atmosphere enables them to delve more deeply into complexities and nuances and thereby generate new understandings, possibilities, and/or decisions that were not clear when their conversation began. Participants and leaders take away new skills and approaches to resolving conflicts, solving problems and making decisions. And careful review and evaluation improves subsequent engagement work.

**What to avoid:** “Public participation” exercises go through the motions required by law or the dictates of PR before announcing a pre-determined outcome. Participants get on soapboxes or are repressed; fight or conform; get overridden or overwhelmed; and are definitely not listening to each other. Available information is biased, scanty, overwhelming, or inaccessible -- and experts lecture rather than discuss and clarify. Poor facilitation, lack of time, or inflexible process make it impossible to deal with the true complexity of the issue. And organizers and facilitators are too busy, ideological, or insecure to review and evaluate the event.

## 5. TRANSPARENCY

*Promote openness and provide a public record of the process, resources, outcomes, and people involved.*

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**At its best:** People's attitudes and actions engender trust. Relevant information, activities, decisions, and issues that arise are shared, while respecting privacy where necessary. People experience planners, facilitators, and participants with official roles as straightforward, concerned, and answerable. Members of the public can easily get involved, stay engaged, and contribute to the ongoing evolution of outcomes or actions the process generates.

**What to avoid:** It is hard, if not impossible, to find out who is involved, what happened, and why. Research, advocacy, and answerability efforts are stymied. Participants, the public, and various stakeholders suspect hidden agendas and dubious ethics. Participants not only don't trust the facilitators but are not open about their thoughts and feelings.

## 6. IMPACT

*Ensure each participatory effort has the potential to make a difference.*

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**At its best:** People sense -- and can see -- that their engagement was meaningful, influencing government decisions, empowering them to act effectively individually and/or together, or otherwise impacting the world around them. Media and communications ensure the appropriate publics know the engagement is happening and talk about it with each other. The effort is productively linked to other efforts on the issue(s) addressed. Because diverse stakeholders understand, are moved by, and act on the findings and recommendations of the program, problems get solved, visions are pursued, and communities become more vibrant, healthy, and successful -- despite ongoing differences.

**What to avoid:** Participants have no sense of having any effect -- before, during, or after the public engagement process. There is no follow-through from anyone, and hardly anyone even knows it happened, including other people and groups working on the issue. Participants' findings and recommendations are inarticulate or useless to policy-makers -- or seem to represent the views of only a small unqualified group -- and are largely ignored or, when used, are used to suppress dissent. Any energy or activity catalyzed by the event quickly dies out.

## 7. SUSTAINABILITY

*Promote a culture of participation by supporting programs and institutions that sustain quality public engagement.*

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**At its best:** Each new engagement effort is linked intentionally to existing efforts and institutions (government, schools, civic and social organizations, etc.) so quality engagement and democratic participation increasingly become standard practice. Participants and others involved in the process gain knowledge and skills in democratic methods of involving people, making decisions and solving problems. Ongoing spaces are built in communities and online, where people from all backgrounds can bring their ideas and concerns about public affairs to the table and engage in lively conversation that has the potential to impact community and national issues.

**What to avoid:** Public engagements, when they occur, are one-off events isolated from the ongoing political life of society. For most people, democracy means only freedoms and voting and perhaps writing a letter to their newspaper or representative. For activists and public officials, democracy is the business-as-usual battle and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. Few people -- including public officials -- have any expectation that authentic, empowered public participation is possible, necessary, forthcoming, or even desirable. Privileged people dominate, intentionally or unintentionally undermining the ability of marginalized populations to meaningfully participate.

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### Who is Behind this Document?

The **National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation** (NCDD), the **International Association of Public Participation** (IAP2), and the **Co-Intelligence Institute** are leading this collaborative effort to develop a standard set of principles we hope organizations in the field of public engagement can agree on.

With new attention and emphasis on collaboration, participation, and transparency thanks to the leadership and vision of the Obama administration, we feel it is more important than ever to provide clarity about what we consider to be quality public engagement.

Visit [www.thataway.org/2009/pep\\_project](http://www.thataway.org/2009/pep_project) to get involved, or contact NCDD's director, Sandy Heierbacher, at [sandy@thataway.org](mailto:sandy@thataway.org) with questions.