

Principles of Effective Consultation¹

What is *Consultation*?

The word *Consultation* has been used to describe a range of different activities. The following is an outline of 6 common understandings, each of which is in current use.

Consultation Intended to Influence Outcomes

This type of *consultation* is characterised by processes that provide maximum opportunities for participants to express their opinions, and for these ideas to influence the outcomes.

1. Thorough Reporting/Decision Making - This type of *Consultation* is the most inclusive/empowering of participants. It results in reporting or actions that acknowledge the full breadth of ideas contributed by participants. Actual decisions may or may not be made in a particular consultation forum ... regardless, all the comments are faithfully recorded and reported back, and decisions made take account of the full range of views expressed by participants. **Participants, individually, have significant influence** over the outcomes of the process.

2. Thematic Reporting/Decision Making - This type of *Consultation* also bases its work in the commentary of participants, however, consultants are only committed to reporting, including or acting on the dominant/majority themes of participant feedback. Again, actual decisions may or may not be made in a particular consultation setting. **Participants, collectively, have the primary power** in the outcomes of these types of consultation.

3. Ideas Gathering - In this type of *Consultation*, the consultant is *shopping* for themes and/or ideas. An open, ideas gathering exercise such as this can generate a wide range of possibilities, particularly if creative methodologies are used. However, it remains within the discretion of the consultant to decide which ideas are reported, included or acted on. Any or all of the ideas offered by participants may, or may not, be acknowledged ... there are no guarantees! **The consultant decides** which ideas have merit.

4. Concept Testing - In this approach, *Consultation* is a means of seeking advance reactions to a proposed position or product. This *market testing* will determine whether the proposition is supported, modified, discarded or replaced. The consultant is liable to

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be affected by thematic responses and strong opinions. Again, **the consultant determines** how much influence participants have.

Consultation Not Intended to Affect Outcomes

This type of *consultation* is characterised by processes that result in participants generally sitting and listening to the consultant or other *talking heads*. Often consultants who plan this type of *Consultation* are not willing to be open with participants about the intentions of the process.

5. Information Provision/Concept Promotion - This type of *consultation* is generally either a public relations exercise or advance marketing to key affected/interested groups. The process might be designed to make participants feel valued or included. It might be to sell a product or position. It might be intended to pre-empt future opposition (*We did consult you...*). It might be simply to provide core information in an efficient way or to generate a *frame of reference* for the future amongst participants. Here, **the employer determines** priorities.

6. Nominal Exercise - There are some situations in which *consultation* is a prescribed part of (for example, a legislative) process. When those conducting the *consultation* place little or no value on participants' ideas, the focus is simply on filling air space. It's not unusual for a meeting to **either** be unplanned, with anyone saying anything they want about the topic (... or its many tangents!) **or** a very formal process with the consultant or pre-set speakers talking, until *time's up*. Again, **the employer determines** the process and outcomes.

In Summary

Most consultants have their own understanding of what consultation is. So do most participants! When the two do not match, participant disappointment or anger can be the result. Legitimate, ***genuine consultation should affect outcomes***. Therefore, consultation not designed to affect outcomes is not genuine consultation. However, the remainder of this handout does not take a position on which is the *correct* definition of the word *consultation*, amongst those intended to affect outcomes, to some extent at least. It does, however, argue that:

- **Consultants** have a moral responsibility to clearly articulate the purpose of any given exercise, from the outset (eg. in all advance material), and,
- **Participants** are well advised to clarify the purpose of any *consultation* they are invited to, before deciding whether organisational time should be spent attending. (This is an ethical decision, because this time expenditure occurs instead of some other activity.)

Principles of Effective Consultation²

The following are the principles that form the basis of consultation by ESSQ. How do they relate to the way you would like consultants/researchers to treat you? Are you willing to apply the same principles to consultation with members of your community?

Effective, Ethical Consultation...

- **Provides clear information on participants' likely level of influence on the final outcome of the process.**
What is the nature of this consultation ... which of the understandings of *consultation* being applied here? Any of the activities described above are legitimate provided that participants are aware of what you mean when you say you are *consulting* them. It is critical that participants, from the outset, have clear information on the level of power they have in the process. This enables them to make sound, ethical decisions about whether or not to participate, what *line* to take during the process, what priority to give their involvement in the context of their overall workload, and how much time/energy to contribute (including time spent preparing/following up).
- **Allows sufficient time for participants to provide high quality responses.**
This is particularly important where a response representing the interests of groups (as distinct from individual opinions) is sought. It shows that you respect potential participants, understand that they must generally negotiate their position with their group, and recognise that they are generally busy people!
- **Is a process of exchange.**
It is critical that participants leave a consultation meeting with a sense that they have gained from the process. This might be in terms of new ideas/insights, contacts/networks or information/resources. Consultants have a responsibility to resource and support potential participants prior to and following meetings, in order to optimise their ability to contribute, and their motivation to act on the outcomes of the consultation (where this is appropriate).
- **Ensures ownership of both process and outcome by those affected.**
Involvement in the process of agenda setting and process planning can make the difference between a sense of *ownership* and a defensive reaction, by participants. Provision of clear, concise background material contributes significantly to participants' ability to offer relevant and considered input. The opportunity to reflect on findings enables stakeholders to challenge inaccuracies and progressively generate incentive to act on the outcome.

² This statement of principles was developed following, and largely based on the findings of, a workshop held at the National Rural and Remote Youth Affairs Conference, *Choices and Chances*, in Wagga Wagga, NSW, in April 1993.

- **Uses existing networks, organisations and structures, where these exist.**
 Some community members feel *consulted to death*. It is important that, where possible, existing groups who have already considered questions relevant to the topic are utilised as *key informants*. This need not exclude the option for input by other concerned or affected people. On the other hand, it may be important to identify interests that are not represented by existing groups, and provide explicit opportunities for others to contribute. Often, existing groups believe they represent a wide body of interest. Accordingly, they may feel *put down* by your decision to consult beyond them. Where broader consultation is necessary, it is critical that you inform the existing groups of your decision, and remain ready to deal with their response. The alternative is for them to feel *betrayed*. This may have a serious negative affect on the overall process if not resolved.
- **Focuses on listening, rather than *telling*.**
 Consultants should present as *people* rather than *experts*. This increases the confidence, particularly of community members, to contribute their ideas. Taking the attitude of a *mutual learner*, rather than a *professional teacher*, maximises the range of perspectives contributed by participants and stakeholders. Where possible, retention of an open mind on findings until the consultation process has concluded can facilitate the emergence of *natural* common ground across interested parties. On the other hand, if firm directions are emerging (or have been pre-established), it is empowering to inform future participants of this, to allow them the opportunity to respond to these agendas.
- **Seeks out diverse participants.**
 It can be tempting to predominantly involve those who have, over time, developed some commonality of opinion. It is important not to assume that particular *communities of interest* are homogenous in either their needs or their ideas. Identifying and involving all sides is critical to the long term success of strategies arising from consultation, and may even generate new, innovative ideas.
- **Involves *cultural interpreters* where necessary.**
 Willingness to identify cultural differences within *communities of interest* can lead to the need to employ additional resource people, acceptable to those cultures, to assist in the process of consultation and/or interpretation of findings. In this context, *cultural* is used widely to apply to any identifying characteristic of a group not shared by the consultants (eg. age, sexuality, sex or class, as well as race/ethnicity).
- **Is conducted using engaging, participatory processes.**
Talkfests do not suit many people. Use of creative, participatory processes during consultations is useful in maximising the contribution of all stakeholders. Methodologies other than the conventional large group discussions (requiring confidence from participants) input from consultants (risking *telling* rather than *asking*) and/or questionnaires (requiring literacy skills, often of a high order) can enable all participants to explore options and generate consensus.

- **Is presented in context.**
Identifying the context in which the consultation is occurring, and other areas potentially affected by findings, will assist participants to select relevant input. It also encourages participants to consider their priorities early, rather than *setting participants up to fail* in their achievement of a *wish list*, or generating competition with other equally deserving interests. The context includes information about the number/range of people being consulted during the overall process. (Clearly, if you are one of 6 bodies being consulted, as distinct from 200, you are likely to prepare for the process quite differently.)
- **Ensures that all public information is clear, articulate, accessible and relevant.**
Well informed participants can provide focused responses. A balance must be struck between *information overload* and a sense of mystery about the purpose and framework of the consultation.

Remember ... *Do Unto Others!* Consult them as you would like to be consulted.