

# Collaborative Public Engagement for Building Trust in Government

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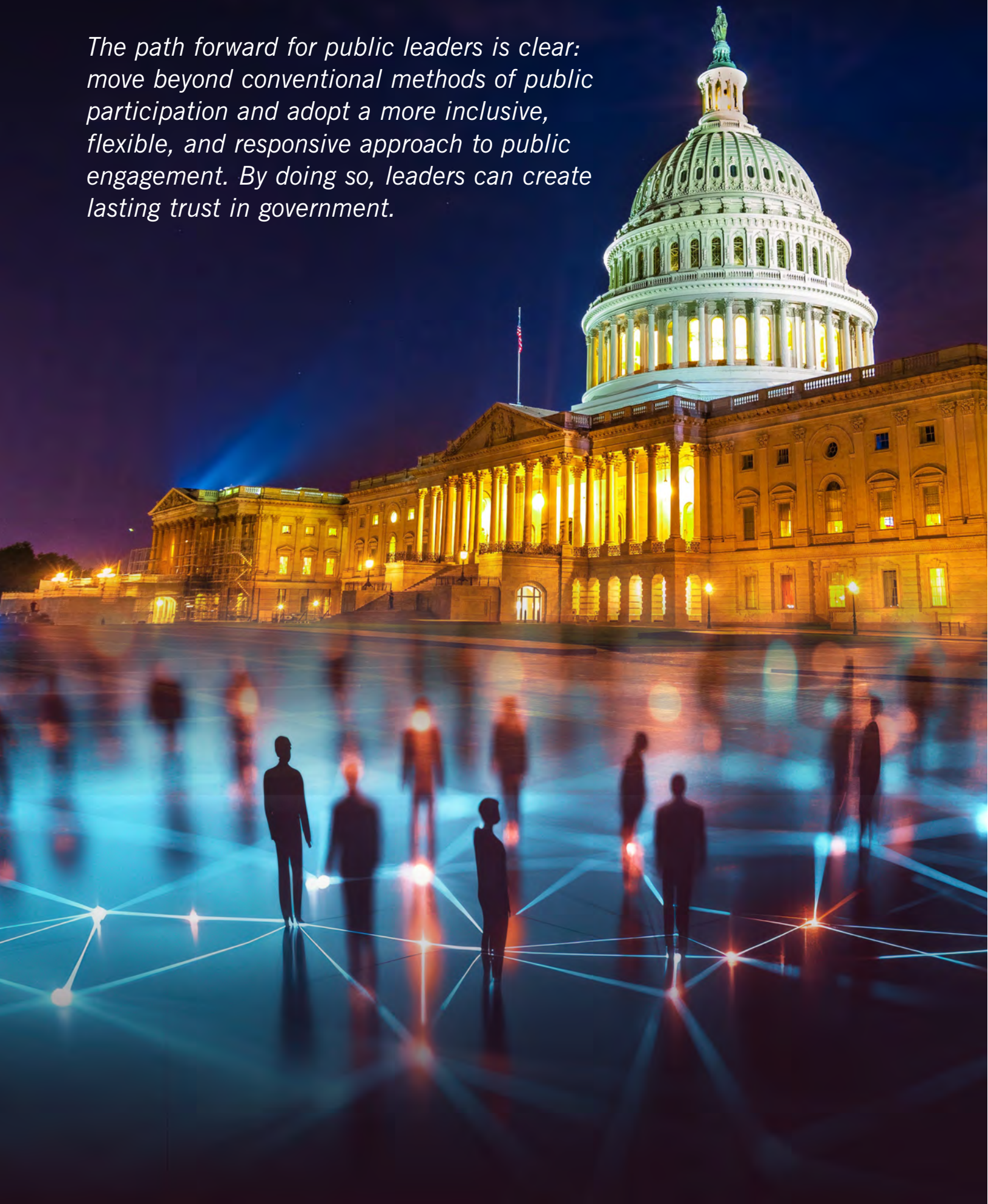
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*The path forward for public leaders is clear: move beyond conventional methods of public participation and adopt a more inclusive, flexible, and responsive approach to public engagement. By doing so, leaders can create lasting trust in government.*



# Foreword

On behalf of the IBM Center for The Business of Government, we are pleased to present this new report, *Collaborative Public Engagement for Building Trust in Government*, by Julia Carboni, Director of the William D. Ruckelshaus Center with faculty appointments at Washington State University and University of Washington.

This report presents a comprehensive compilation of insights and strategies derived from a series of blog posts authored by Julia Carboni. The author's insights equip public leaders and managers with practical tools for engaging the public in ways that foster meaningful participation and collaboration. Drawing from two decades of research, training, and practice in public engagement, the report emphasizes the importance of engaging with different community voices; other insights address the strengths that local communities can build upon to inform public policy and achieve public goals.

Engagement with the citizenry is essential to a healthy democracy, connecting people with their governments and giving them a stake in decision-making and problem-solving. This report proposes innovative strategies that create more collaborative and responsive processes, ultimately enhancing more effective governance. The author explores key aspects of public engagement, including establishing a mindset or approach to engagement, developing its purpose, stakeholder identification, process design, communications with the public, and using engagement data effectively.

By leveraging these and similar strategies, government leaders can foster public participation that strengthens trust. This report provides valuable perspectives and actionable ideas to enhance public engagement practices, fostering greater collaboration between governments and communities.

We hope this report has provided valuable insights and actionable steps to enhance your public engagement practices and foster greater trust in government.



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# Introduction

This report is designed to equip public leaders and managers with practical tools and strategies for engaging the public in ways that can help restore trust in government.

In a time when trust in civic institutions is at an all-time low, fostering meaningful public engagement has never been more important. This report draws from an asset-based community development framework, emphasizing the value of community voices and the strengths that local communities can build upon to shape public policy and achieve civic goals.

Public engagement is essential to a healthy democracy. It connects citizens to their governments, giving them a stake in decision-making and problem-solving. Yet, many traditional methods of public participation fail to meet community expectations and limit opportunities for real dialogue. When designing public engagement, it's time to think outside conventional methods and make sure that process design matches the purpose for public engagement, ranging from consultation to empowering citizens to make decisions. We propose strategies that create more inclusive, collaborative, and responsive processes—ultimately leading to greater public trust and more responsive policy outcomes.

This report will explore key aspects of public engagement including:

- The Mindset of Collaborative Engagement
- Developing the Purpose of Engagement
- Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders
- Designing Effective Engagement Processes
- How to Best Communicate with the Public
- Using Engagement Data Effectively

It will provide actionable tools that public leaders can use to improve transparency, communication, and responsiveness drawing on examples from the William D. Ruckelshaus Center and the author's two decades of research, training, and practice in public engagement and collaboration.

### **The William D. Ruckelshaus Center**

The William D. Ruckelshaus Center is a collaborative policy and research center that facilitates the resolution of complex public policy challenges in Washington State and beyond. A partnership between Washington State University (WSU) and the University of Washington (UW), the Center serves as a neutral resource for government, businesses, and communities to engage in dialogue, build consensus, and develop sustainable solutions to public issues.

The Center focuses on collaborative governance, using inclusive, multi-stakeholder processes to address a wide range of policy areas, including civic health, environmental policy, housing security, and more. By employing methods like participatory facilitation, the Center creates spaces where diverse groups can work together to co-create solutions to pressing public challenges.

The Center's work emphasizes trust-building, transparency, and the active involvement of all stakeholders. It has been instrumental in projects ranging from civic health, natural resource policy, criminal justice policy, and health policy. These initiatives and projects demonstrate the Center's commitment to fostering long-term, equitable, and community-driven outcomes that improve public policy and governance.

The Center is also involved in expanding collaborative governance practices nationally, through its role as Secretariat of the University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG) and continues to develop leadership capacity across sectors through educational and training programs for civic and elected leaders.



# The Mindset of Collaborative Engagement

In the introduction, six aspects of public engagement were introduced. The first aspect is “The Mindset of Collaborative Engagement.”

At the heart of any successful public engagement is the mindset leaders and managers bring to the process. A collaborative approach is key to fostering trust and delivering effective policy outcomes. But what does a collaborative mindset look like in practice?

A collaborative mindset begins with the belief that communities are not passive recipients of policy decisions but active participants in shaping them. This approach, grounded in the [principles of agile government](#), emphasizes adaptability, openness, and the ability to respond to feedback. Instead of rigid, top-down processes, public engagement becomes a flexible, iterative partnership between governments and citizens.

The Center’s Project for Civic Health exemplifies this mindset—an initiative led in partnership with the Washington State Office of the Lieutenant Governor, the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, and the Jackson Foundation. The Project for Civic Health seeks to improve civic health and reduce polarization in Washington State, and provides a model that other governments may wish to adapt. The project brings together diverse stakeholders, including elected officials and community leaders, to address challenges related to civic engagement, collaboration, and trust in government. Through participatory processes, such as summits and ongoing dialogues, the project works to co-create solutions that foster stronger civic collaboration and more responsive governance.

This statewide effort began with Washington Lt. Governor Denny Heck’s observation that polarization was at an all-time high and the civic health of Washington was in jeopardy. Instead of developing a set of top-down solutions, Lt. Governor Heck started with a listening tour across the state to understand how communities perceived this situation. While he knew there was a problem, Lt. Governor Heck also knew that the strongest solutions would come from communities and not from the top down, exemplifying the collaborative engagement mindset.

After Lt. Governor Heck’s tour, the work expanded. The Center took what he learned and pro-



duced the Common Ground for the Common Good report: <https://projectforcivichealth.org/common-good-for-the-common-ground/>. This report signalled interest in hearing from the community instead of developing top-down solutions. It became the basis for an October 2023 Summit for Civic Health convening, which gathered some 200 civic and elected leaders from across Washington to provide additional perspective and co-create solutions to improve civic health.

By bringing together diverse stakeholders—elected leaders, community members, and interest groups—this initiative fosters an environment that values different perspectives and points to collaborative solutions. This integrative approach not only builds trust but also leads to more innovative and effective policies.

In fostering this mindset, public leaders should focus on building relationships, practicing



active listening, and remaining open to adaptation as community needs evolve instead of developing top-down approaches without community voice. Emphasizing collaboration over control helps create a more inclusive process when public engagement is necessary for developing policy solutions.



## Developing the Purpose of Engagement

Before jumping into public engagement, it's essential to define a clear purpose. What do you hope to achieve? Is the goal to consult the public, involve them in decision-making, or empower them to create solutions? Developing and communicating a purpose that aligns with both government goals and community needs is a crucial step toward successful engagement.

Developing the purpose of engagement is a key starting point for every project. The Center creates participatory processes where the public and stakeholders can co-create the engagement's purpose. This ensures alignment between the project's goals and the community's needs, building trust and fostering more sustainable outcomes.

To define the purpose of engagement, public leaders should ask key questions: What is the desired outcome? What level of involvement do stakeholders want? How can their input directly shape decisions? A clear, shared purpose not only guides the process but also sets expectations for all involved.

Building on the Project for Civic Health example in the previous section, when the Center brought folks together for the Summit for Civic Health, they were asked to co-create solutions that would improve civic health. Many ideas emerged including the need for collaborative leadership training for elected officials so they could collaborate effectively with the public and other elected officials. A partnership was developed with the Washington Collaborative Elected Leadership Institute (WA-CELI). The purpose of this initiative is to train local elected officials in collaborative problem-solving, ensuring they have the skills needed to lead in ways that reflect their community's needs.

For the pilot in 2024, the Center partnered with the Association of Washington Cities to develop a program for city elected officials. While the Center had a clear charge from the Summit for Civic Health, Center staff refined the program purpose and design with AWC staff and program design focus groups made of local elected leaders to ensure we were developing programs that would be responsive to their needs. The team collectively defined purpose to: Create a network of elected leaders who are concerned about civic health and polarization to learn and implement collaborative leadership principles, strategies, and tools to tackle real world challenges in cities and towns.

Guided by this purpose, the Center developed a four-month, immersive training program to provide small teams of city elected officials with the collaborative leadership skills to tackle real-world challenges facing their cities and towns. Under the guidance of expert facilitators, teams learned and practiced a broad range of strategies to embrace differing viewpoints and build consensus to maximize success. In addition to receiving valuable training, participants had the opportunity to learn about challenges facing communities in other parts of the state and build meaningful connections with peers invested in improving the civic health of Washington state.

Developing the purpose of engagement is a foundational step that sets the tone for collaborative public engagement. It aligns government objectives with community needs, establishes trust, and ensures that participation is meaningful and impactful. By clearly defining why engagement is necessary, leaders create a shared understanding that guides the process and builds confidence among all participants.

As others approach their own engagement efforts, consider the critical role that a well-defined purpose plays in building trust. Ask yourself: How can your organization center community voices in shaping the engagement's goals? What shared outcomes can unite stakeholders? By anchoring the process in a collaboratively developed purpose, organizations can pave the way for trust, transparency, and impactful decision-making.







## Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders

Effective public engagement depends on identifying and involving the right stakeholders to achieve purpose. Without broad representation from those directly affected by policy decisions, engagement processes can fall short of being inclusive and equitable. There should be an emphasis on the importance of stakeholder identification, ensuring diverse voices are heard and included. Identifying who to bring to the table and getting them there can be difficult, particularly with limited time and resources. This is where existing relationships and a solid understanding of who can bring people together makes life easier.

In the Washington Collaborative Elected Leaders Institute discussed in the previous section, we narrowed our participant list to city elected leaders for our pilot cohort. Then we worked closely with Association of Washington Cities staff to identify participants from across the state to ensure we had broad representation in the program. The Center also relied on AWC to help us with recruitment—they are a trusted partner in the local government space and when the put the call out for participants, the response was overwhelming. With minimal effort the pilot program was quickly filled with fifty elected leaders from fifteen city teams.

We employed a similar process in identifying and engaging participants for our 2023 Summit for Civic Health and our 2024 Civic Health Network kickoff. In each case, Project for Civic Health partners spent several months developing and refining a potential list of participants and then figuring out how to reach them—an ask from the Lt. Governor is a powerful tool, especially from one as well respected as Lt. Governor Heck. The Center also relied on relationships other partners had with potential participants. In each case, we wanted to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders committed to improving civic health. The purpose of the 2023 Summit was to co-create solutions and we had broad participation from approximately two hundred participants. The purpose of the 2024 summit was to seed and nurture a statewide network of organizations committed to civic health. The resulting group was smaller—around forty participants—because our purpose to intentionally create relationships among participants that would go beyond the meeting. In both cases, we sought out participants and organizations from across the political spectrum because our belief is that it will take everyone to improve civic health in Washington State. The Center's primary requirement for stakeholder inclusion was a commitment to improved civic health.



Using participatory methods, the Center facilitates discussions where every voice counts. Public leaders can take a similar approach by mapping out all potential stakeholders and ensuring they have the opportunity to participate in meaningful ways. This not only increases the legitimacy of the process but also helps build trust among participants. The Center encourage leaders to think about including those affected by an issue, those who can influence an issue, and those who can champion or block an issue as a starting point for developing an inclusive list of stakeholders. Once the initial list is complete, leaders should engage stakeholders on the list to develop a snowball sample approach to find out who is missing from the conversation.

Stakeholder identification should be proactive and inclusive, focusing on those most affected by policy decisions. By involving a diverse range of voices, public leaders can ensure that engagement processes are representative and lead to more equitable outcomes. And remember—having relationships with civic and elected leaders who can bring people to the table will make the process easier for leaders to identify and engage stakeholders.





# Designing Effective Engagement Processes

Designing the right engagement process is critical to achieving successful outcomes. The process should be flexible enough to adapt to community needs while ensuring that the purpose of the engagement is met. Innovative process designs, which blend participatory methods with collaborative governance principles, can help government succeed in service delivery.

For example, in the Civic Health Summit and WA-CELL training, the Art of Hosting techniques were used to facilitate open, inclusive discussions where participants could actively contribute. The Art of Hosting is a participatory methodology designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue and collaboration to create spaces where all voices are valued, trust is built, and co-creation of solutions to complex challenges is emphasized. This bottom-up approach ensures that engagement is shaped by the people most affected, making it more responsive and relevant.

At its core, the Art of Hosting blends a variety of facilitation techniques, including:

1. **Creating group agreements to guide conversation and deal with disagreements as they arise.** For example, we asked Summit for Civic Health participants to “Share the Air and Notice their Impact” so that one person would not monopolize discussion.
2. **Identifying core assumptions related to purpose that guide the work.** For example, in WA-CELL, one of our core assumptions is that human connection is the root of all systems change- including building civic health. That led us to a design that emphasized relationships and trust building among participants.
3. **Circle Practice**—A method where participants sit in a circle to create an equal space for dialogue, ensuring everyone can speak and be heard. Creating a circle center with elements related to the group provides a point for the circle to gather around. In WA-CELL, our center included Legos for some of our activities.
4. **World Café**—A structured conversational process that fosters open discussions by having participants rotate between tables to discuss specific questions, encouraging cross-pollination of ideas. World Café’s are great for understanding how people are experiencing a particular policy issue. It does not require participants to come to a resolution or solution but provides important space to understand lived experiences.
5. **Open Space Technology**—A self-organizing process that allows participants to set the

agenda based on what they feel is most important, promoting creativity and engagement. In Open Space, our agenda is guided by purpose but not preordained.

6. **ProAction Café**—A dynamic process for collaborative problem-solving, where participants bring forward ideas or challenges, and others offer insights and feedback. This process is usually held in three rounds where a problem is identified and expanded with lived experience in Round 1 and solutions are offered and refined in Round 2 and 3. In large groups, participants rotate among groups to encourage cross-pollination.
7. **Harvesting**—The practice of capturing insights, ideas, and key takeaways from discussions in real-time, ensuring that contributions are documented and reflected upon to shape future actions. Harvests may be from the group or individuals and may be tangible—journals, written report outs from groups, visual harvests from conversations- or intangible—relationship building, increased trust in government and public processes.

By using these tools in the process design, one is shown the importance of creating space where groups can navigate complex issues collaboratively, ensuring that solutions are co-created through the collective wisdom of the group. This is great in situations where diverse stakeholders need to engage in deep conversations. The emphasis on adaptability and shared leadership makes it particularly effective for fostering trust and building consensus in collaborative governance. Remember though that it is critical to communicate to participants why they are gathered and what role they have in policy making—whether it is consultation, co-creation, or empowerment to make decisions.

In agile government terms, the engagement process is seen as an evolving system. Leaders should design processes that allow for feedback and adaptation, ensuring that public input is not just collected but actively shapes the outcome. By focusing on flexibility and responsiveness, public leaders can design processes that are efficient. Moreover, when designing engagement processes, consider methods that encourage participation from all stakeholders. Government can create multiple points of entry for different groups, use facilitation techniques that foster dialogue, and remain open to adjusting the process as it evolves.







# How to Best Communicate with the Public

Clear and transparent communication is the cornerstone of any successful public engagement process. Without it, even the most thoughtfully designed processes risk losing the trust and interest of participants. Effective communication ensures that the public understands not only the purpose of the engagement but also how their input will shape decisions and outcomes. In turn, this fosters a sense of partnership and accountability between public leaders and the communities they serve.

Whether it's a small-town dialogue or a statewide initiative, clear communication helps build trust and sustain engagement over time.

## 1. Communicating Purpose and Role

Before engaging the public, it's critical to articulate the purpose of the engagement clearly. People need to know why their participation matters and what role they play in the process. Are they being consulted for their opinions, actively involved in shaping decisions, or empowered to co-create solutions? Setting clear expectations not only enhances participation but also builds credibility and trust.

For example, a recent event began by explicitly communicating the purpose: to co-create actionable solutions. Participants were informed upfront about how their input would be used, which encouraged them to fully invest in the process.

## 2. Ensuring Accessibility and Inclusion

Effective communication must also be inclusive and accessible. This means considering the diverse needs of your audience, including language barriers, literacy levels, and access to digital tools. Use plain language to explain complex topics and ensure materials are available in multiple formats, such as print, online, and audiovisual content.

Use a combination of methods to ensure accessibility. This may include creating a website dedicated to a project, offering printed materials for in-person meetings, user friendly online platforms like Mural for virtual meetings, and sharing updates via email and social media. These efforts will ensure that a wide range of participants can access and understand the information, regardless of their preferred communication method.



### 3. Building Two-Way Communication Channels

Public engagement is not just about sharing information; it's about listening. Leaders should create opportunities for two-way communication where participants can ask questions, share concerns, and provide feedback. By doing so, you create a sense of partnership and demonstrate that their voices truly matter.

Use interactive methods like facilitated discussions and feedback forms to capture participant input in real-time. Additionally, encourage participants to reach out to project leaders directly through email or phone to ensure ongoing dialogue even after the event concludes.

### 4. Using Multiple Platforms

People consume information in different ways, so it's essential to use multiple platforms to communicate effectively. Social media, newsletters, public meetings, and websites can all play a role in keeping the public informed and engaged. Tailor your messaging to fit the platform—social media posts should be concise and visual, while newsletters can provide more in-depth updates.

Use social media to share quick updates and photos from events, while more detailed reports and resources can be housed on a project's website. This multi-platform approach will ensure that stakeholders can stay informed in a way that works best for them.

### 5. Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is key to building trust. Share updates regularly and be clear about how public input is being used. If certain suggestions cannot be implemented, explain why. Demonstrating accountability helps participants feel that their time and effort are valued.

Create a standalone website to house reports, newsletters, and other materials that document the project's progress. This transparency allows participants to see how their input is shaping the project and ensures accountability of all stakeholders.

### 6. Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Communication can fail when it becomes one-sided, overly technical, or sporadic. Ghosting participants—failing to follow up after an event or engagement process—is particularly damaging. To avoid this, public leaders should commit to regular updates and responsive communication, even if there's no major progress to report.

### 7. Examples of Effective Communication

- During the development of an elected leadership institute, the project leader kept participants informed at every stage, from recruitment to post-program feedback. Emails, in-person meetings, newsletters, and virtual forums were used to communicate the program's goals, schedule, and outcomes.
- At another event, a combination of pre-event materials, live updates, and post-event reports ensured that participants were informed before, during, and after the event. This approach reinforced the project's commitment to transparency and kept participants engaged.

## Practical Tips for Leaders

- **Start Early:** Begin communicating the purpose and details of the engagement process as early as possible to build anticipation and understanding.
- **Be Clear:** Use plain language and avoid jargon to ensure your message is easily understood.
- **Stay Consistent:** Provide regular updates throughout the engagement process, even if there's little new information to share.
- **Invite Feedback:** Encourage participants to ask questions and share their thoughts, and make sure to respond in a timely manner.
- **Follow Through:** After the engagement process, share the outcomes and explain how public input was used.

By prioritizing clear, inclusive, and transparent communication, public leaders can create more effective engagement processes that foster trust and collaboration. Communication is not just a tool for engagement—it is the foundation for building lasting relationships between governments and communities.





## Using Engagement Data Effectively

Data is a powerful tool in public engagement. It provides insights into public opinion, tracks the effectiveness of engagement processes, and informs decision-making. Using data throughout a project ensures that public engagement remains transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of communities.

Data collection can play a crucial role in shaping the engagement process. For example, it is important to gather data from participants representing varying perspectives and demographics. This data can help refine discussions by highlighting shared concerns and identifying areas of potential collaboration. Feedback gathered in real-time allows project coordinators to adjust the process as necessary, ensuring that a project stay aligned with participant needs and priorities. An iterative approach means that data is not only collected but acted upon, resulting in more meaningful and productive engagement.

Using data effectively in public engagement means not just collecting it but also sharing it transparently with participants and the public. Data from dialogues and feedback sessions should be shared with stakeholders to demonstrate how public input can shape outcomes and future steps. This openness builds trust by showing that decisions are grounded in community input. Additionally, data is used to refine engagement processes, ensuring they are as responsive as possible to the community's evolving needs. A standalone website can be created to house this data and make it transparent.

By integrating data into public engagement processes, leaders can create a more accountable and responsive approach that fosters trust and encourages ongoing participation.



# The Path Forward for Collaborative Public Engagement

As this report has shown, building trust through public engagement requires more than just gathering input—it demands a strategic, thoughtful approach centered on collaboration, transparency, and responsiveness not captured by conventional public engagement methods. By embracing a collaborative mindset, defining clear purposes for engagement, identifying and involving diverse stakeholders, designing adaptable processes, communicating effectively, and using data to refine efforts, public leaders can foster meaningful participation that strengthens civic trust and leads to more effective governance.

When communities are treated as partners in the decision-making process, the outcomes are not only more equitable but also more sustainable and reflective of the public's true needs. It is important to design public engagement processes with and for government entities to maximize stakeholder input. Various participatory methods can transform how public leaders engage with their communities.

The path forward for public leaders is clear: move beyond conventional methods of public participation and adopt a more inclusive, flexible, and responsive approach to public engagement. By doing so, leaders can create lasting trust in government, enhance community health, and ensure that policy outcomes reflect the needs and desires of the people they serve.

As government leaders embark on or refine public engagement efforts, remember that the journey to building trust is ongoing. It requires patience, openness, and a commitment to listening, learning, and adapting. Leaders will make mistakes but stay the course. By applying the tools and strategies discussed in this report, government can create a more collaborative and effective form of governance that truly empowers communities and leads to lasting positive change.





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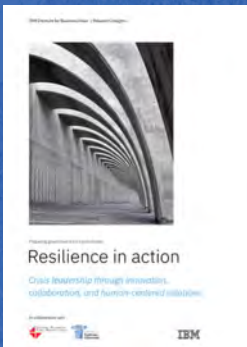
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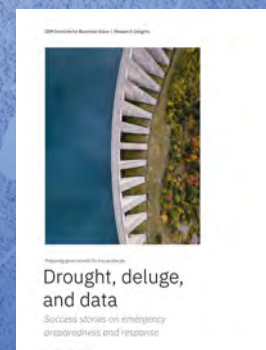
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