Public Engagement and
Why it’s OK to Have a Bad Time Sometimes

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AMMA Conference 2023
4DEC23
You’re Supposed to Have a Bad Time Sometimes... it’s Science

Different fields of social science have models and/or frameworks that illustrate how conflict, uncertainty, awkwardness, and uncomfortability are necessary parts of doing the public’s business.

Acknowledge the discomfort and embrace it as a valuable part of the public process.

“the waterfront and its redevelopment are subsumed within a controversial port-city interface zone of conflict and only occasional collaboration” – B.S. Hoyle, 2000

What I hear when I’m being yelled at is people caring loudly at me.
Hi I’m Rob D

- Local Government since 2015
- City Manager in Homer since 2020
- MS Environmental & Natural Resource Science from Humboldt State University
- MBA and an *almost* complete MSDM from University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Unofficially the most bearded City Manager in America
Why is Being a City Manager so Hard?

Difficult Problems

Dynamic Expectations

Difficult People

... all occurring at the same time
ALASKAN CITY MANAGER

This creature has adapted to the crushing pressure and oppressive darkness.
Today’s Pathway

• Wicked Problems
• Shifting Baselines
• Polarization
• Controversy Spillover
• The Groan Zone
• The Value of Public Engagement
Wicked Problems

It can’t all be on the consent agenda
What are Wicked Problems?

- “[Wicked problems] are complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable.”

- “Wicked problems seem incomprehensible and resistant to solution”

- Wicked problems are something that City Managers and Councils deal with all the time

Examples of Wicked Problems in Local Govt

- Housing & Homelessness
- Public Safety & Crime Prevention
- Climate Change Adaptation
- Public Health & COVID-19
- Urban Planning & Development
Properties of Wicked Problems

• Every wicked problem is **essentially unique** and there is **no definitive formulation** of a wicked problem

• There is no immediate and **no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem**

• There is **no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error**, every attempt counts significantly, and **the planner has no right to be wrong**

• There are **unlimited ways to attempt to solve** wicked problems

The Wicked Problems Mindset

• Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
• Become more comfortable with uncertainty
• Focus on elevating the conversation, not just winning the argument
• Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
• Work toward creating a learning community

Sourced from Martin Carcasson’s ICMA presentation “Tackling Wicked Problems: Building Capacity for Deliberative Engagement”
Shifting Baselines

It’s amazing what we can become accustomed to, and how quickly we forget where we started.
Shifting Baseline Syndrome

“SBS describes a gradual change in the accepted norms for the condition of the natural environment due to lack of human experience, memory and/or knowledge of its past condition”

This environmental concept can easily be seen and applied in local government settings

This is the worst day of my life.

The worst day of your life, so far.
Consequences of SBS Applied to Local Gov’t

- Increased societal tolerance for degradation of conditions in local gov’t public engagement
- Alteration of expectations for what is a desirable state of discourse in government decreasing the productivity of the decision-making environment
- False perceptions of past conditions resulting in inappropriate or unreasonable goals for the public and elected officials

Political Polarization

It can’t be like this forever… right?
Political Polarization

“Political polarization occurs when subsets of a population adopt increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (i.e., affective polarization), as well as ideologies and policies (ideological polarization)”

Political Polarization

- In order to avoid people with whom they disagree, Americans will:
  - Accept smaller paychecks
  - Move to new places that better match their political views
  - Swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically

Why is Polarization so Pervasive?

We’re built for it!

Why is Polarization so Pervasive?

Humans are wired to:

- Crave certainty and consistency
- Love simplistic good versus evil narratives
- Gather with like-minded people
- Cherry pick evidence that supports our views

Flavors of Political Polarization

- Affective polarization – based on feelings
- Ideological polarization – based on beliefs, values and ideologies
- Geographic polarization – i.e., urban versus rural
- Cultural polarization – based on cultural values and practices
- Toxic polarization – extreme form that can lead to violence and breakdown of norms
- Political sectarianism – the tendency to adopt a moralized identification with one political group and against another
Elements of Political Sectarianism

- Othering – the tendency to view opposing partisans as essentially different or alien to oneself
- Aversion – the tendency to dislike and distrust opposing partisans
- Moralization – the tendency to view opposing partisans as iniquitous (wicked, extremely immoral)

“When all three converge, political losses can feel like existential threats that must be averted – whatever the cost.”

The Future of Polarization?

Possible Future #1: Polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle that will continue to increase

Possible Future #2: Polarization is a pendulum that has reached its apex

The Future of Polarization?

“existing empirical findings provide mixed evidence as to which of the possible futures is in fact emerging”

Translation: We don’t know

We Can Fix Polarization, Right?

“One key factor in determining which will win out may be whether political and media institutions are able to combat misperceptions of polarization. To the extent they do so successfully, this might intercept polarization’s self-perpetuating cycle, and help re-establish the existence of at least some common ground between the parties.”

Analysis: Uh oh

A Glimmer of Hope in Local Gov’t?

“Shifting from our dominant, bias-inducing processes at the national level will be exceedingly difficult. The adversarial forces tied to the current system are simply too strong. At the local level, however, my optimism finds a home. I believe cities will (and must) step up to save our democracy. Mayors and city managers can’t play political games as much; they must find ways to work together to address their wicked problems.”

Other problems are also your problem, even if they’re not actually your problem.
Controversy Spillover

Controversy spillover occurs when stakeholders connect other events and technologies to your issue which creates a larger controversy with different dynamics than the original controversy.

“Controversy spillover involves both deliberate strategic attempts by actors to shape policy framing as well as unintentional and emergent spillovers.”

3 Major Types of Controversy Spillover

- Spatial: A controversy in one place may spill over to another place
- Technological: A controversy on one technology may spill over to another technology
- Temporal/Historical: A controversy may arise from earlier controversies about other policy issues within a region

Spillover Spreads 3 Ways

• Spontaneously: A stakeholder makes an unprompted connection between an existing controversy and the new controversy

• Prompted: Stakeholders make the connection, based on pre-existing opinions, after a separate controversy is mentioned

• Primed: Where a stakeholder, or group, makes the connection and purposefully provides that information to others

Controversy Spillover Considerations for Local Gov’t

- A controversy spillover mindset can make a policymaking body more adaptable and flexible in their decision making

- Analyzing situations for this concept can help policymakers and planners anticipate controversy spillover

- Research shows that the way policymakers respond to controversy is key in how a spillover unfolds

- Pro-Tip: “Rather than trying to avoid perception spillover or to ‘communicate around’ it, it may be more beneficial to openly acknowledge and attempt to move past it”

The Groan Zone
The part in the middle sucks, and that’s called democracy
The Groan Zone Visualized

DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCING THE GROAN ZONE

DIVERGENT THINKING
- NEW TOPIC
- FAMILIAR OPINIONS
- DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

TIME

CONVERGENT THINKING
- DECISION POINT

Groan Zone

Groan Zone Concepts

• A period of confusion and frustration is a natural part of group decision-making.

• Once a group crosses the line from airing familiar opinions to exploring diverse perspectives, group members have to struggle in order to integrate new and different ways of thinking with their own.

• When people experience discomfort in the midst of a group decision-making process, they often take it as evidence that their group is dysfunctional. As their impatience increases, so does their disillusion with the process.

• Many projects are abandoned prematurely for exactly this reason. In such cases, it’s not that the goals were ill conceived; it’s that the Groan Zone was perceived as an insurmountable impediment rather than as a normal part of the process.

• Misunderstanding and miscommunication are normal, natural aspects of participator decision-making. The Groan Zone is a direct, inevitable consequence of the diversity that exists in any group.

• **Groups that can tolerate the stress of the Groan Zone are far more likely to discover common ground. And common ground, in turn, is the precondition for insightful, innovative co-thinking**
The Infinite Groan Zone – A Local Dilemma

So... Public Engagement is Worth it, Right?

Obviously yes, but not for every item on your agenda.
Why is Local Gov’t so in Love with Public Engagement Anyways?

“Citizen involvement builds trust in government, which is paramount in a democracy.” – Young and Tanner

“That’s a pretty good reason.” – Rob D.

Alaska Context for Public Engagement

Alaska is very rooted in an ethos of local control and my observation is that public engagement is highly valued in Local Government

... yet...

Polarization, declines in civility, abandonment of social norms, and trends like “Zoom-bombing” are undermining the enthusiasm of practitioners and elected officials for public engagement
Articles on the Value of Public Engagement
Advantages of Citizen Participation in Gov’t Decision Making

Learn from and inform citizens

Gain legitimacy of decisions

Build trust and strategic alliances while avoiding litigation

Create better policy and implementation decisions

Disadvantages of Citizen Participation in Gov’t Decision Making

Time consuming

Costly; Decreases budget for implementation of actual projects

May backfire, creating more hostility toward government and political pressure for bad decisions

Does Public Engagement Have the Impact We Think it Does?

The Good News

“Citizens and bureaucrats often have differing views and levels of influence over public decision. This is good news because it means bureaucrats do not unduly influence citizens voluntarily engaged in the work of government, even in highly technical science-based work where a lack of knowledge could lead to the group being more easily influenced.”

The Bad News

“Our results illustrate that when bureaucrats and citizens had differing views on public management decisions, it was the bureaucrats who influenced government.”

“If [the] argument is that citizen participation creates emergence and interdependence that corrects for network imbalance and individual interests, then the primary premise upon which [it] rests is a falsity”

So... is Public Engagement is Worth it?

The social science perspective:

“With widespread public benefit as the goal of any public policy process, it behooves the administrator to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making process when determining the most effective implementation strategy, bearing in mind that talk is not cheap – and may not even be effective” – Irvin & Stansbury

**Normal person translation:** It depends

**My perspective:** Most decisions don’t really need public engagement; the hard part is identifying the ones that do!

Thoughts for the Path Ahead
Thoughts for the Path Ahead

Uncertainty and conflict are necessary, and scientifically proven, parts of the process, embrace them.
Thoughts for the Path Ahead

If the public and Council don’t like the solution, it doesn’t matter that you’re “right”
Thoughts for the Path Ahead

Do it right, or do it twice... there are no shortcuts
Thoughts for the Path Ahead

You have outsized influence in public engagement situations as a City Manager, don’t abuse it.
Thoughts for the Path Ahead

Don’t read the comments
Thank You!

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