Chapter IX. Practical Tips

Here are some nuggets of advice and wisdom from people who practice citizen engagement.

The OECD Handbook on public participation offers the following 10 tips:

Take it seriously: It’s not about how many documents are produced or the number of events that unfold, but rather their content, their process and what is done with the information. This requires planning and dedication.

Start from the citizen’s perspective: Already outline in the section on framing (Chapter VII), the success of the engagement process is dependent on the ability to determine why a citizen might be interested in participating.

Deliver what you promise: An essential step in building trust and civic participation.

Watch timing: This applies across many issues – time for citizens to prepare themselves to participate, timing for relevance in a larger policy process, time for trust to develop.

Be creative: There is no “cut and paste” model of citizen engagement. Every situation requires a unique approach and series of methods.

Balance different interests: No easy task, this is the ongoing challenge of government. Citizen engagement provides another source of input and opens the doors to understanding between differing parties, although this is not guaranteed!

Be prepared for criticism: People may perceive citizen engagement forums as a space to vent. Processes are not always perfect.

Involve your staff: Your staff deserves to be “engaged” as well, either for the project at hand or for internal policy and program development.

Develop a coherent policy: Strengthening government-citizen relations is in itself a policy and is an important complement, not replacement of, the institutions of citizen engagement.

Act now: Do not wait for relations with citizens to become stale. Taking action to engage citizens will prevent future problems.

The following tips were drawn from interviews conducted during research for this handbook:

“Youth engagement [or citizen engagement] is most successful when it is embedded in the process at hand – when it is a priority from the very beginning rather than an afterthought.” Nishad Khanna, Students Commission

“There are three requirements for a successful citizen engagement process: the Three R’s: Real, Relevant and give Responsibility.” Peter MacLeod, The Planning Desk, drawing on Students Commission

“Citizens are more inclined to participate in urban planning processes at a smaller scale rather than a larger scale. We found that long-term plans and vision exercises tend to be a bit far from the day-to-day preoccupation of citizens. Citizens tend to be asked more often to contribute to concrete initiatives that will improve their quality of life.” Pierre Dubé, National Capital Commission
“The subject matter should drive the policy process. The more contentious it is, the more important it is to have all stakeholder groups involved in the decision-making process.”
Katherine Beavis, Department of Fisheries and Oceans

**Document and share results!** This is not being done enough. There are great initiatives in Canada, but it is difficult to learn about them. By documenting the process, successes and challenges, champions of new citizen engagement processes will be contributing to an exciting and emerging field. The Canadian Community on Dialogue and Deliberation ([www.c2d2.ca](http://www.c2d2.ca)) hosts conferences regularly where practitioners in this field have a chance to share experiences, exchange and learn.
This literature was compiled into a bibliography entitled, *A Learning Guide to Public Involvement in Canada* by Mary Pat MacKinnon, Sonia Pitré and Judy Watling. CPRN, Feb. 2007. It is available at [www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1622&l=en](http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1622&l=en).

See Acknowledgements at beginning of document for a list of key informants.


This definition of Public Participation is in clear contrast to that put forward earlier in this chapter and is reflective of the evolving nature of this field.


“Wicked” is a term recently adopted by policy circles, used to describe complex societal issues without a clear “right” answer, often involving a moral positioning.


Public involvement in this document by Turnbull and Aucoin is defined similarly to the working definition of citizen engagement in this handbook.


For a copy of the full Land Use Plan entitled, *Shxunutun’s Tu Suleluxwtst: In the footsteps of our Ancestors* and a copy of the Consultation Policy, visit [www.hulquminum.bc.ca/our_work/projects](http://www.hulquminum.bc.ca/our_work/projects).


22 Adapted from Questions provided by Vancouver Coastal Health – internal document.

23 Adapted from Questions provided by Vancouver Coastal Health – internal document.


25 Having an “impartial” facilitator versus an “insider” as facilitator is the subject of some debate and is further addressed in Chapter VII, section II, 8. Facilitators/moderators.


31 Some of these questions are drawn directly from Vancouver Coastal Health’s Checklist for Citizen Engagement Team, an internal document.


33 Available at www.vch.ca/cc.

34 Available at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/care/romanow/index1.html.


36 Ibid.


38 Ibid. Chapter 1, p. 7.

Ibid.

