

Q: "When is dialogue not really dialogue?"

A: "When it's ... er, something else"

An article for people interested in dialogue and how it relates to other forms of "involvement".

By **Richard Harris**

[DIALOGUE]

WHY DIALOGUE IS DIFFERENT

ORGANISATIONS IN ALL SECTORS are under increasing pressure to "involve" external interests in their decision-making. Many are doing it quite effectively, many are making a pig's ear of it and many are running scared of the idea, not seeing the potential benefits to be had. I want to focus on an increasing problem in this climate of "involve, involve, involve" – the language. We need to get better at using the language of involvement, especially when it comes to clearly communicating to others what we (as initiators) are trying to involve them in (as stakeholders).

An example is the current, rampant abuse of the term "dialogue". I believe that this term should only be used to describe a carefully designed and managed process of "deep" involvement or negotiation. Unfortunately, the Government, local authorities, businesses and NGO's, among others, are all guilty of using "dialogue" when they actually mean something quite different, often in the belief that it gives a more positive glow to whatever they are trying to do. No wonder people become cynical.

Sloppy use of the language and the inevitable underlying ignorance it betrays is harming the whole business of involving people in decision-making. Clearly, what we need is some consistent language and some discipline about using it so that, over time, people will understand what it is they are suggesting, promoting, initiating or being invited to become involved in.

A SIMPLE TYPOLOGY

There have been various attempts at describing and ordering all the ways in which people might be "involved" or might "participate" in some endeavor or other, perhaps most famously Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation" – possibly the first (1969) and most influential of its kind. Other good ones have followed and include David Wilcox's masterful work in "The Guide to Effective Participation" in 1994.

Whilst all of them are excellent in their own right, for me none of them quite fit the bill, particularly in light of the growing demand for, and claims to be doing, "dialogue". So I came up with a simple typology of involvement. Not a "ladder" or a "hierarchy" but "typology" within which all approaches are legitimate in their own right, provided they are not misused or misrepresented.

INVOLVEMENT

Open Dialogue

The decisions will be shared by all stakeholders involved.

Bounded Dialogue

The decisions will be taken by the initiator, but closely and explicitly influenced by the stakeholders involved.

Consultation

The decisions will be taken by the initiator, stakeholders have a limited opportunity to influence them.

Information Gathering

The decisions will be made by the initiator, the stakeholders only have influence in that they provide information.

Information Giving

The decisions have been made, the stakeholders have an opportunity to react.

The common root for these approaches is “involvement” and, of course, since this is not a hierarchy we can’t show them as a list!

It needs to be said that, in the “real” world, involvement is not quite as tidy as any system of boxes and categories might suggest. For example, in practice there is probably a sliding scale between open and bound dialogue rather than a clear line. Notwithstanding this, we all need some way of structuring how we think about these things.

THE FIVE APPROACHES

Information Giving

The initiator makes a unilateral announcement of intent or decision. No attempt is made to gather or listen to views: recipients must take it or leave it. The aim is to ensure that those who need it are in receipt of information.

- May be acceptable where the impact on recipients is minimal or where the initiator has been mandated to make the decision. It can also be relevant in times of crisis or when leadership is expected and welcome.
- Typical processes: use of TV, radio, print media, direct contact, leafleting etc.

An example would be a local council placing an advert in the local paper and writing to residents to announce that a new play area is to be built in the nearby park and work is to begin at the end of the month.

Information Gathering

Here the initiator undertakes extractive research. The respondents have no opportunity to influence the process or the eventual use of the information, but the aim is to inform decision-making processes. Typically, samples of individuals and groups are engaged in interview or questionnaire based research.

- Limited numbers of people are engaged, so great care should be taken in analyzing, interpreting and using the results.
- Typical processes: focus groups, “Priority Search”, surveys, questionnaires, opinion polls, personal interviews.

The local council sends an officer along to two local schools to ask questions of a sample of students, from different years, about what kind of play equipment they would like to see in the new play area to be built in the park.

Consultation

The initiator seeks views on a prepared proposal. Consultees do not share, but may influence, decision-making. The aim is to generate responses, which enable decision-makers to have some understanding of consultees’ thoughts and feelings on the proposal. There is an intention to listen to responses and the potential for amendments to, or further development of, the proposal.

- Poorly communicated parameters for the process may lead to frustration, e.g. consultees may consider that their views have been ignored if they do not see them enacted.
- Typical Processes:
 - Interactive: meetings, workshops, presentations, direct contact etc
 - Passive: leaflets, exhibitions, print media, etc.

The local council, who are going to build the new play area, seek the views of residents on the best place to locate it (3 options are given) and the type of equipment it should include. They arrange an exhibition in the park’s cricket pavilion on Saturday, an open meeting/exhibition in the school hall on a Thursday evening and a questionnaire to go to all local residents (within 1/4 mile of the park).

Bounded Dialogue

The “parameters” of the dialogue are pre-determined by the initiator, they may be tightly drawn and non-negotiable. Primary ownership of the “problem” and solutions is with one key player (the initiator), the big decisions have been made. The dialogue aims to enable collaboration in the development of an initiative or often, the development of policy or strategy. Typically, the subject and purpose of the dialogue are set and the process is managed by a facilitator who is ideally independent, but in some circumstances may not be.

- If stakeholders do not “own” the dialogue parameters their ownership of the outcomes may be non-existent or limited, leading to dissolution of groups and communication structures after primary tasks are complete. Care should be taken if long-term structures are a desirable outcome.
- Typical Processes: workshops, meetings, events etc – shaped and designed primarily to address the initiator’s content needs, but taking into account the stakeholders process needs.

The local council invites key local organisations to a meeting to discuss the idea of building a new play area in the local park.



exec summary

With increasing pressure to include stakeholders in decision-making, more and more organisations are claiming to do “dialogue”.

Unfortunately they often mean something completely different. A “dialogue” should be a designed and managed process with a profound level of stakeholder participation. There are other forms of involvement, which have their own validity, but there needs to be an agreed meaning of what is “dialogue” and what isn’t. Without this organisations risk alienating their stakeholders and accusations of greenwash.



Open Dialogue

All stakeholders decide the parameters of the dialogue together. This starts with joint analysis of the issue/situation followed by consensus building and collaboration in moving forward. It aims to develop decisions that address the **needs** of all stakeholders, rather than their **positions**. The process usually involves many stakeholders (and “problem-holders”) and a meaningful commitment of time and resources is required. A strong sense of shared ownership of (process and content) outcomes may be generated along with numerous other “invisible” products (improved relationships, common understanding, pre-co-ordination etc.).

- This is a “transparent” working process, designed and managed by an independent third party facilitator/mediator with and on behalf of all parties involved. Positional argument is discouraged. Multiple perspectives and options are accounted for.
- Typical Processes: a range of interactive working methods may be adopted which are shaped and designed to meet all stakeholders’ process and content needs

Acme facilitation Services (sponsored by the council) contact key local stakeholders to invite them to take part in a number of meetings to discuss the recreational needs of the local community and how those needs can be best met. The idea of building a new play area may be one option for consideration later.

PUTTING THEM ALL TOGETHER

The approaches in the typology may stand alone, but in practice, most processes of involvement will use a number of the approaches in some kind of sequence. For example, an “open dialogue” involving many stakeholders may produce some preliminary decisions (e.g. options) that the stakeholders feel should go to a whole community for “consultation”. The responses from the community then come back into the dialogue process to inform further decisions to be taken by the stakeholders this may be their agreed, favoured option.

The results can then be confirmed with the wider community through a process of “information giving”.

It is critical that we think about the whole process of decision-making (who will make what decisions, when, with what information? etc). Without this there is a danger of creating a confusing jumble of “approaches” that never quite connect or flow; this is not only difficult to manage, but it makes it practically impossible for people to see how their input has, or might, influence decisions.

WHAT TO DO AND WHEN TO DO IT

When you identify a need to involve others in decision-making you first need to ask yourself (or your organisation) some hard questions:

Who really needs to be involved?

Likely to be those who may be affected by, or may affect, the outcome or decision (a common definition of a stakeholder...).

To what degree can/should they influence the decisions to be made?

What is their interest? Who do they represent? What are the implications of excluding them? It may be useful to think about the “Oilers” – those who may make implementation easier; and the “blockers” – those who may make any implementation difficult.

What is your mandate in this matter?

What mandate do **you** have for making or contributing to the decision(s) to be made? Does it exist? Is it legitimate and sufficient? A cold, hard look at your existing mandate will tell you much about who else needs to be involved in what decisions, at what stage.

How much time is available?

An extensive, open dialogue process may take many months; another approach to involvement may be required if a critical decision must be made sooner. What are the real deadlines, for which decisions?

What resources (people/skills/money) are available?

Obviously, different approaches have different resource needs and implications. Try to see beyond this year’s revenue budget. Ask yourself – what are the short and long term implications of involving people in this way (your favoured approach). Can you sustain it?

What barriers to involvement exist?

All sorts of practical barriers may exist to people’s involvement. Most can be addressed by ensuring that the process is designed to meet the needs of the people to be involved.

How much should others be involved in shaping the involvement process?

As a general rule, the more they need to be involved in the making of decisions (and potentially their implementation) the more they must be able to shape the process by which those decisions will be made.

What is the relevant history that will need to be dealt with?

People’s experience of previous attempts to involve (or exclude) them will shape their expectations of this latest suggested process. Failure to recognise and deal with relevant history can kill a process of involvement before it has started.

Some “Golden Rules” (no matter what approach you take)

Have clear objectives (short, medium, long term)

Create a transparent process Ensure a clear rationale for all process decisions

Communicate clearly what is really “up for grabs”

Be committed to open and honest communication, about everything, all the time

Finally, any process of involvement may, if badly managed, create many more problems than it solves. On the other hand, well managed involvement can produce profoundly positive results, for everyone involved – that’s why we bother. ■

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