

Contracting Controversial Facilitation Work: Getting the Front End Right



Introduction

This document summarises the discussion held at VFN on 18 July 2011, at which eighteen facilitators considered a scenario for community/stakeholder engagement. The discussion was facilitated by Jen Lilburn.

The Scenario

Imagine you've been asked to facilitate a stakeholder workshop around a proposed development in a sensitive environmental area. The (local government) client is planning to have a range of interests at the workshop (developers, local residents, the local business development group, naturalists etc) and there are high expectations amongst all of these groups that this is what will happen.

The purpose of the workshop is to inform Council's deliberation as to whether the development should proceed.

The workshop has been advertised in the local paper; it is not known how many people will turn up.

1. What would you want to ensure or clarify before you took this work on?

- What are your expectations of the facilitator's role and influence? I.e. setup, format
- What is their commitment to having an external facilitator?
 - How much are they paying?
- What resources are you providing or committing to this?
- What's the history/background/context of this forum/issue?
 - Story, background, hotspots
 - History/context - previous consultations? What came before?
 - Any successes so far? Failures? Learnings?
 - Where does the workshop fit in whole consultative process?
 - Councillors/other groups fixed views or positions?
 - Detail on sensitivity of this topic?
 - River/forest/ecosystem resources for exploitation v's environment
 - Any known sensitive issues/areas/individuals?
- Clarify goal/expectations/outcomes → how realistic?
- What are the plan and objectives?
- What are the givens?
- Does the ad explain the workshop purpose and encourage realistic expectations?
 - Is there opportunity to manage expectations?
- Anyone significant missing? How to engage them?
 - How have people been engaged to participate?
- What's negotiable, and what's not negotiable?
 - for self
 - for client
 - For participants

- How will this influence your decision making? IAP2 spectrum
 - Who is the decision-maker?
 - What is the capacity of participants to influence? Or is it tokenism?
 - What is the promise – level of influence?
- If it doesn't meet people's needs to participate, what other opportunities will there be? Are all views included?
- Who has most investment in the outcome?
- What is the timeframe?
 - How much time do we have – what's the “drop-dead” date???

2. What would you build into your planning of the workshop to ensure that the workshop provided space for all views to be expressed and heard?

- Prepare thyself (+ debrief/reflection)
- Accurate recording and knowing what will happen with outputs
- Convergence, Collation, Priorities? Values, extract themes and test out with participants
- Ensuring there is a follow-up and feedback process
 - Follow-up mechanism post-workshop (to deal with issues, allow additional comment ...)
- A process to park issues – to keep process flowing but not lose important issues
- Clear purpose objectives and input into 'invitation'
- Incorporate workshop guidelines/behaviours/conduct up front – be clear
 - including on the purpose
- Inform – scope – CEO? What are the non-negotiables – clarity
 - Legislation, planning requirements
 - What can/can't be influenced?
- Who are the stakeholders and how do we engage them?
- Contact sample of participants to gauge expectations
 - What would make it worthwhile for participants?
- Build a sense of community/connection between participants
- Allow mechanism for people to contribute beforehand e.g. a synopsis of these views on display in the room
- Range of interactive techniques or processes (limit being talked at)
 - Small group discussion (+ table facilitators who've been briefed on their role)
 - World café? Not time to get entrenched. Good to listen and explore. Vision
 - Parallel thinking – Everyone looks at every view/perspective (works if groups, rather than public)
 - Small, mixed groups
 - Innovative/bridging ideas. New insights
 - Minimise presentations and maximize interaction
- Set up the space appropriately
- Thorough briefing of speakers, table hosts etc.
- Ensure there is **no** media presence