

Winning Positive Community Outcomes Through Good Governance of Stakeholder Relationships: The Case of the City of Melville, Western Australia.

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1. Introduction and Aims:

The overarching aim of this paper is to provide insights into an exploratory journey undertaken by the City of Melville staff and elected members towards better Relationships – especially improved Engagement Practices- with its Stakeholders.

At least three compelling reasons underpin this journey.

- The first is the anticipated changes to the Local Government Act (1995) which features an Integrated Strategic Planning Framework.¹ The imperatives contained therein become legally compliant on WA Local Governments in July 2012 (Department of Local Government WA 2010). One of the implications is that Councils will be legally obliged and eventually evaluated on how well they work with partners to engage their citizens and bring about positive outcomes for the communities they serve.
- This underlines a second and more immediate need, namely, to improve the reputation of Councils and build trust with and amongst their stakeholders. This need has been substantiated by research conducted by the City where recent surveys show that community perceptions of engagement and trust are indeed lower than in previous years (Catalyse 2011 & Catalyse 2010).
- The third reason is that communities are seeking a greater say in how they are governed. To some extent, these needs are met as Councils fulfill obligations through various mechanisms such as Council elections, and communications exercises. However, few local governments go beyond the minimum requirements.

This paper is also posited on the assumption that business as usual is not delivering the desired outcomes on the City's community-related projects. This view resonates across many other public and private organisations where there remains a systemic disconnect between engagement rhetoric and the scope of participatory reality (Buteau & Brock 2011). Project-related data and engagement results at the City of Melville, between September 2010 and August 2011 confirm this and further revealed that:

- Many staff and elected members were still in the space of 'traditional' consultation methods (Chappell 2008) at best or in many instances, labeling non-participative approaches to stakeholder relationships as 'engagement'.
- A reliance on varying sets of skills, experience and intentions of individuals and teams have made for inconsistent interpretation and application of engagement principles, processes and practices.
- A poor understanding of the relationship and integration potential between engagement and other in-house frameworks relevant to relationship requirements for the City.
- These have resulted in the application of less desirable techniques in situations, leading to unmet expectations and incurring significant costs in terms of time, money and other resources in some cases.

The major emphasis of the approach adopted by the City has therefore been to address or redress the issues raised above through an emphasis on stakeholder engagement and civic participation within a Stakeholder Relationships Framework. This Framework was designed with the specific aim of becoming relevant to the actual requirements of the operations of the City and its stakeholders. However, the experiences can be generalized to inform subsidiary aims of this paper, namely:

- To help evolve the conceptualisation of engagement in a local government context

¹ The Integrated Strategic Planning Framework provides the basis for improving the practice of community engagement and strategic planning in local government. It addresses the minimum requirements to meet the intent of the amendments to the Local Government Act, WA (1995) and outlines processes and activities to achieve an integrated strategic plan at the individual local government level.

- Provide insights on choices about relationships to suit particular needs, and ultimately to derive more participatory solutions to problems that impact stakeholders, especially community members.
- Increase the capability of practitioners to approach complex situations requiring interaction with stakeholders to achieve more positive outcomes.

3. Contextual Background:

The approach adopted in this paper is informed by Social, Political, Stakeholder and Participatory research (e.g. Freeman, 1984; UN, 2006) as well as best (and not so best) practice experience from a variety of settings and industries. The paper is also guided by the argument that local government relationships should promote and uphold good governance principles (UN, 2002). Defining the principles of good governance is both difficult and controversial. However, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP 1997) enunciated a set of principles that, with slight variations, appear in much of the literature.² The City's Stakeholder Relationships Framework borrows heavily from this foundation and is built on the assumption that good governance excellence is built on accountability, integrity, transparency and consensus-building amongst other principles (LGMA 2005).

It is further acknowledged in the literature that good governance in local governments cannot be achieved without promoting and protecting the interdependence and contribution of the pillars of local governance. In this context, these include in their different, but equally legitimate roles, Elected Members of Council (Representative Democracy), the City's Corporate Management (Appointed bureaucracy) and Civic Engagement (Participative Democracy) (UTS et.al 2010). This is consistent with legal imperatives of the aforementioned Integrated Planning Process (Government of WA 2010) which emphasizes engagement as the cornerstone of the move from representative democracy to a more balanced decision-making mechanism consisting of elected members (proportional representatives of the constituency), public participation (driving force behind a Community-driven Plan of priorities and long term aspirations) and an appointed Bureaucracy (responsible for providing specialist skills and knowledge to implement corporate and operational plans and strategies).

It is recognized that while Integrated Planning is well established in New Zealand, the Eastern states, and some parts of Queensland, the process is still in its infancy in Western Australia. In some cases, it can be argued that the enabling structures are already in place. However, this researcher argues that the desired balance has not been achieved and provisions need to be made for it to be pursued and maintained once in place. An example of this imbalance is that decision making rests squarely on the shoulders of elected members. Over the last two elections, Councilors are only voted in by a percentage of an already slim portion of the eligible electorate. (Local Government Election Centre WA 2011). The turnout rate in the last two elections at the City of Melville was 36.4% in 2009 and 33% in 2011 of the eligible electorate. Over those two elections Elected Councillors averaged between 52 to 60% of that figure. Most concerning however, was that almost half of the Councilors were returned uncontested at the polls (WA Electoral Commission 2011). This can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Either as an indicator that all is going well, or symptomatic of a lack of motivation attributed perhaps to community apathy. However, a

² UNDP (1997) defines good governance by focusing on four major components namely legitimacy (government should have the consent of the governed); accountability (ensuring transparency, being answerable for actions and media freedom); competence (effective policymaking implementation and service delivery); and respect for law and protection of human rights

degree of responsibility needs to be assumed for the lack of genuine participatory mechanisms that represent the voice of a significant percentage of the population-currently not involved in decisions that affect their lives .

4. Methods

The undertaking to develop a new framework started with a review of the pre-existing framework which was validated and tested in a variety of ways over a period of seven months.

The transition from the old framework to the new one was informed by a simple research strategy - designed and implemented to obtain a rigorous and defensible product. Although unapologetically qualitative in approach, every attempt was made by the researcher to use reliability and validity as appropriate concepts for attaining rigor in the research underpinning the framework developed. Validity in this exercise was taken as being the extent to which the data was plausible, credible and trustworthy; and be defended when challenged. The revision of the previous framework was thus conducted on the premise that changes were to be made whenever responsibility for reliability and validity could not be assumed or defended.

The first step in this process was an extensive literature review. This review spanned theoretical and empirical work on areas such as engagement, participation, stakeholder theory and practice, community consensus-building, conflict resolution, power relationships, and decision-making in groups; group composition and leadership. In total, approximately 150 journal articles, manuals and research reports were reviewed, some of them providing general guidance, others a lot more specialized information. In addition to hosting three internet forums on project-related issues, many more websites and informal avenues such as newspaper articles and web podcasts were explored.

On the basis of both the literature review and the other components mentioned above, the 'stakeholder relationships framework', was drafted and circulated to a cross section of staff members in all service areas for validation and refining. This process involved working with all 9 service areas at the City, in workshops and participating in ongoing community projects. Additionally, a reference group was formed of Community Development staff (as this is where the framework sits in the organization). A total of seven workshops were conducted with staff between October 2010 and March 2011 to test developments and obtain feedback, but also to share the journey with a core group of practitioners who were at the forefront of community interaction. During that period, the community engagement coordinator sat on 9 project teams providing advice on community engagement and helping teams develop strategies wherever appropriate- five with Strategic Urban Planning, two with Technical Services and two with Environmental Services. Over 300 staff and members of the public (on projects) provided the research with ideas, comments, questions, amendments. Last but not least, two surveys were conducted, one with the community to gauge attitudes to engagement and one with a sample of approximately 30 staff to compare levels of understanding and interpretations of the concept and commitment to implementation.

The presentations and discussions at the various workshops and presentations were again incorporated into the work, which resulted in a document that contained much more rigor and technical jargon than was needed for a staff document let alone a public one. It was then agreed that a position paper would be formulated which in turn would inform a whole host of other documents including a new policy, revised framework and a handbook to serve as a guide for our staff-especially at project level. (See figure 1: below):

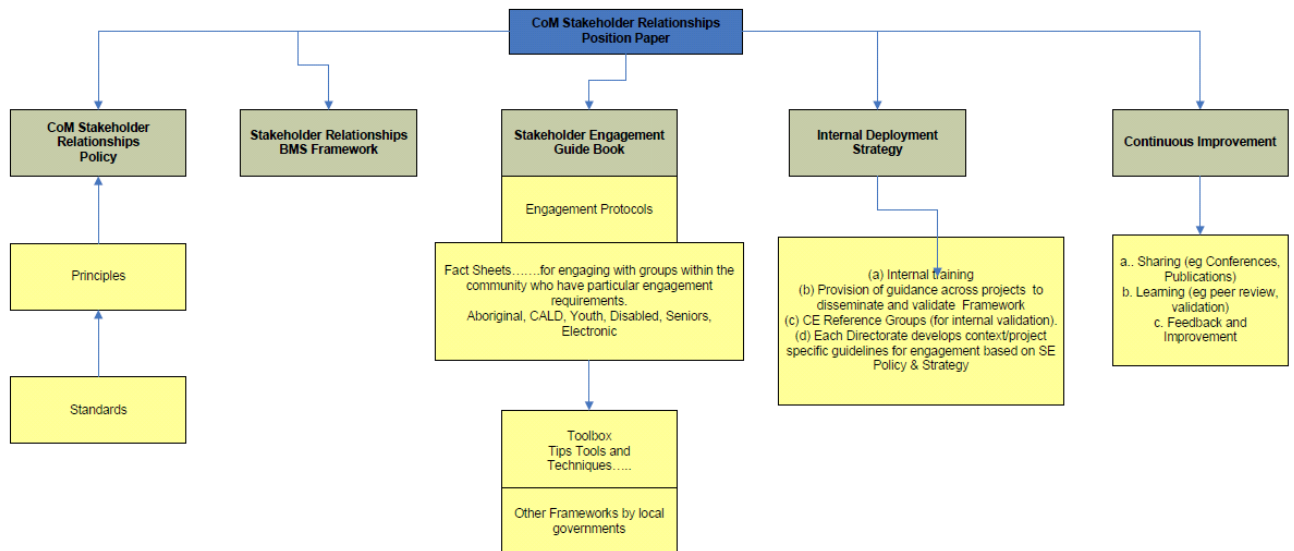


Figure 1: Documentation produced as a result of the revision of the Stakeholder Management Framework.

In keeping with the validity requirements stated above, feedback on these documents was sought in a variety of ways from a cross-section of organizational users of the framework. External validity was achieved by checking with external practitioners of engagement. Examples include engagement consultants, trainers from the International Association of Public Participation and other practitioners from Local and State Government. This allowed (and continues to allow) for greater scrutiny and exposes the limitations of the research and opportunities for growth. On this basis, decisions were taken on how to proceed with the finalization of the strategic documents from figure 1. They were amended and approved by the operational and executive management teams and finally endorsed by City of Melville in September 2011 with in-built provisions for continuous improvement.

5. Findings (Results and Discussion)

The findings from this process can be categorized into two broad groups. These are (a) conceptual and (b) contextual (that is pertinent to operations and culture of the City of Melville—a metropolitan local government in Western Australia). The two are inextricably intertwined, and the researcher has found it more practical to present them together as one finding impacts another.

5.1 Conceptual Findings

The first challenge in the development of the new framework was conceptual. It involved clarifying the definition of the terms which were associated with engagement for the benefit of staff. What distinguishes engagement from other relationships in the new framework is that the concept of engagement is about enabling stakeholder participation in the Council's activities, projects and policies. At the very least, engagement seeks to achieve consensus on what is (or indeed is not) agreed upon by stakeholders to address issues affecting their well-being and sustainability. Ideally it is about empowering stakeholders (whenever possible) to become part of the decision-making process (OECD, 2001).

In the original framework, at least two important limitations of the mainstream models adopted prevented staff from reasonably justifying their choices of approach within an engagement approach.

- Firstly because their experiences confirmed that not all relationships undertaken by the City qualify as engagement.
- The second reason was that not all stakeholders could be described as ‘the community’, whereas arguably all communities, whether geographical or otherwise, are stakeholders. Therefore the new approach defaulted to the term ‘stakeholder’ as the most generic interpretation rather than community.

From this definition, it was determined that the cornerstone of the old framework’s approach - stakeholder management (Berman et.al 1999)³ - needed to be replaced by stakeholder engagement principles (IAP2 2006; Chappell 2008). At the core of this departure is the argument that whilst the latter concept lends itself to interactive approaches, the former is more about situations where key stakeholder actions in the present and future need to be influenced and/or mitigated (Scott 2003). The latter considerations are acknowledged as legitimate in some instances. This is because it is recognized that despite great progress made, the City still operates in a social and political landscape which is not shaped by local government concerns alone. Therefore staff and elected members still require approaches for instances where external activities of other stakeholders such as state government and major developers create dependencies for the City. By clearing up what engagement is and providing a systematic way for applying it, staff are finding that they can be more realistic about setting expectations for stakeholders and especially in being honest about the community’s level of influence at the outset.

With a new emphasis on participatory citizenry and deliberative mechanisms to enhance authentic stakeholder engagement (Hemmati, 2002), it was considered a logical extension of the framework to map out and distinguish engagement from other relationships. the City undertakes such as communications and marketing, risk management and customer service. This resulted in the expansion of the framework to articulate a Stakeholder Relationships Continuum (See Figure 2).

³ Stakeholder Management is derived from instrumentalism, whereby firms have a stake in the behavior of their stakeholders. A fundamental assumption espoused here is that the ultimate objective of corporate decisions is marketplace success and a rationalization of all business outcomes. Stakeholders are viewed as groups that are to be managed in order to assure results.

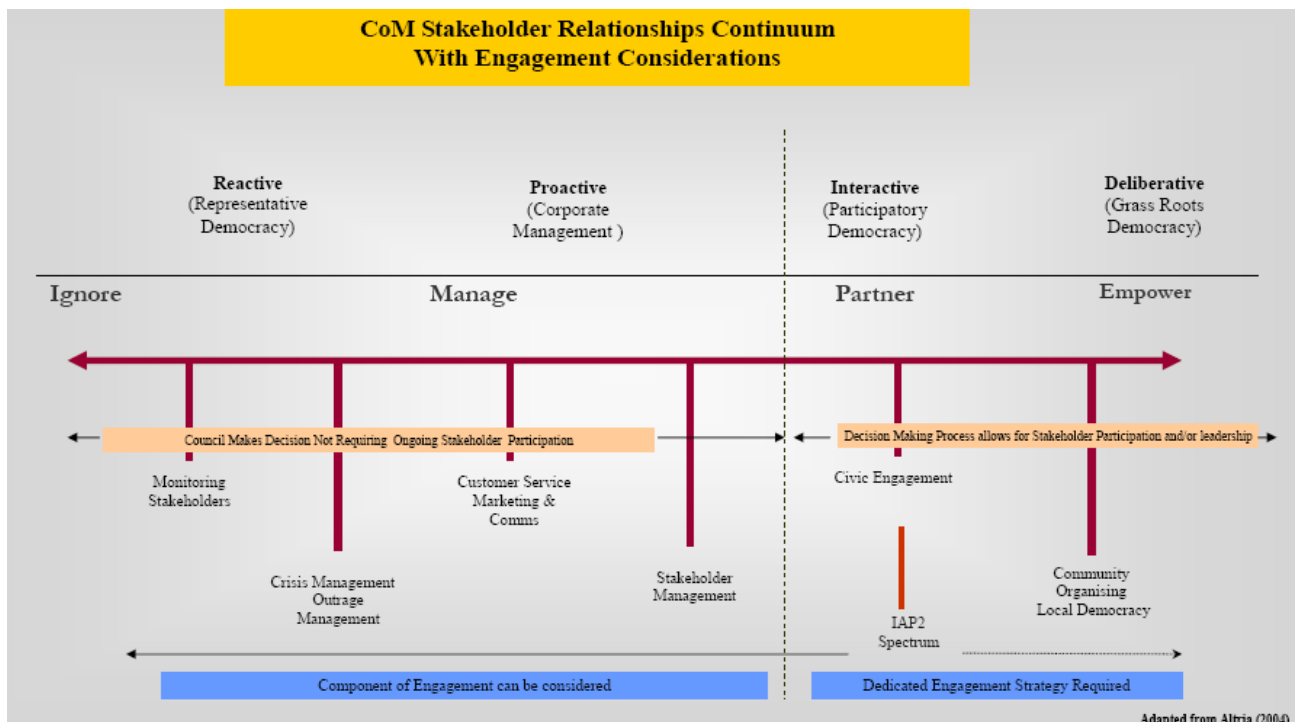


Figure 2: Stakeholder Relationships Continuum. -Adapted from Altria (2004).

As illustrated in figure 2, the differences between more traditional non-interactive approaches and relatively newer forms of inclusion and participation were modeled and represented. At one end of the spectrum, were the more reactive approaches where the perception of residents as ratepayers or service clients and customers was prevalent and very little opportunity for participation in the decision-making process was provided. At the other end, the spectrum accommodates more proactive and interactive approaches whereby stakeholders are characterized as citizens –and ultimately decision-makers- in their local government area- and the implications therein (Jeffrey, 2009).

Based on the flexibility of this continuum, users are afforded a wide consideration of the relationship type(s) and/or the level of engagement required, and helps determine a course of action that would be relevant to the strategic and/or project objective(s) being considered. By acknowledging other types of relationships and giving them legitimacy, engagement becomes a distinct practice in its own right with a clear definition and principles being recognized. It has already proven useful for new framework users to determine what type of Relationship (or combination of types) need to be considered from the Stakeholder Relationships Continuum, and provide some insight into what kind of outputs / outcomes can be derived from this process. A practical example of this is that when ISO risk management standards (AS/NZS ISO 31000:2009) failed to incorporate social risk (outrage management) the City’s framework deemed this component unnecessary or irrelevant. The Continuum had capacity to absorb this element of risk until such time that the organisation is prepared to accommodate it in its appropriate place.

Despite the distinctions between relationships, it was determined that this did not preclude their use in tandem with each other. This made allowances for combining an engagement strategy with a component of a communications plan and vice versa. An example of this in practice was the planning of a stakeholder management workshop to discuss the future of a major hospital project in the City, the largest in the state. A decision on the project had already been made and thus the workshop did not warrant a full engagement strategy but

rather to convince other major stakeholders of infrastructure concerns the City had on behalf of its community. This did not preclude the adoption of engagement tools and techniques as part of the stakeholder management strategy. In fact, the consideration of engagement components went a considerable way towards providing staff with a gauge on exactly how much stakeholder contributions would be taken into account and what would or would not be used and why.

On the basis of these conceptual interpretations, and in a bid to reflect the requirements of local government in a rapidly changing urban environment in Western Australia, a new framework was drafted (See figure 2 below). This framework was developed in collaboration with the City's executive, and adapted from its' business excellence model's learning cycle depicting approach, deployment, results and improvement indicators (SAI 2007). Figure 2 draws together all these aspects and consolidates the conceptual findings of the research in context. The model is also depicted in a way which is both simple and lends itself to discussion about opportunities for progress.

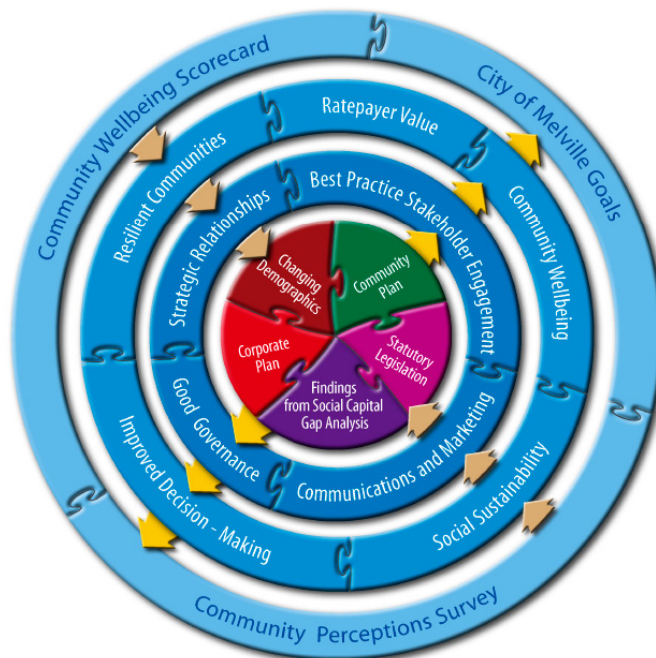


Figure 3: Visual Representation of the City of Melville's Stakeholder Relationships Framework (CoM 2011)

5. 2 Contextual Aspects

From an organizational (or cultural) point of view, engagement slowly gained acceptance over the course of this project. It was deemed critical in the successful development of acceptable policies and decisions in government, the private sector and the community by many Executive and Operational staff. However this did not automatically mean that it was well understood and implemented at the organizational level.

What emerged was that an internal engagement strategy had to be developed in order to create an enabling organizational culture. The main components of the engagement of staff were (a) Training (b) Promotion and Advocacy (c) Direct involvement in projects, and (d) Development of a Champions Group and a Continuous Improvement Team. Additionally, there was a continuous communications strategy throughout the revision of the old framework that enabled staff to be party to any developments. Arguably, this increased their potential for ownership of the process.

Although the framework has been developed, it is anticipated that it will take time to deploy throughout the organisation. However some early wins include:

- the endorsement of a new policy and accompanying documentation by Council
- The same policy upholds engagement to be a core element of the City’s operations and is to be considered at the outset of all projects.
- Both time and budgetary resources are to be formally dedicated to engagement.
- The inclusion and support of the CEO and the Executive Team to explore and continuously improve the framework.

Even if engagement was distinguished from other types of relationships, a lot of confusion remained in terms of when to apply engagement principles and when to adopt other types of relationship approaches. It was thus necessary to develop a process which allowed users to consider whether engagement is indeed the way forward or whether another form of relationship was preferable. In some cases, this was a non-negotiable when prescribed by legislation for example. In other instances a decision had to be made whether engagement was required and whether an engagement strategy or merely a component of engagement was needed. It emerged that if engagement was not required or may be harmful it should not be undertaken. However, given the inconsistencies in interpretation and application across projects, it became evident that this should be demonstrated systematically rather than intuitively. A process map with a few simple questions was developed and proved highly successful in saving time and costs in pursuing the wrong relationship.

After establishing what engagement was, and when or not to engage, the research moved quite rapidly to the development of a six step guide which is summarised in Figure 3 below:

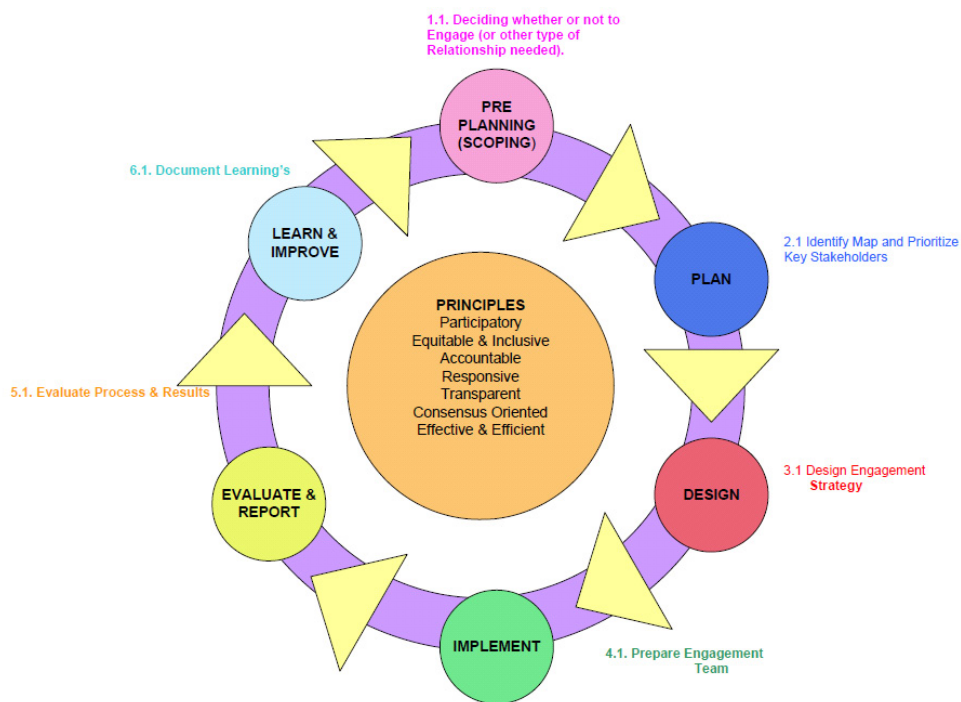


Figure 4: CoM Stakeholder Engagement Planning Guide Summary.

This guide was an amalgamation from the literature review and marked a deliberate attempt to align imperatives of other local government engagement frameworks with operational reality at the City. Evidently a lot of the guide is adapted from mainstream frameworks such as the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2 2006). Most of these frameworks were fairly comprehensive. However many of them either lacked the depth that we wished to achieve or in some instances, or contained far too much detail to serve a

practical purpose in the City's projects in others. On the one hand, it was necessary for example that the City's framework delved a lot deeper into ensuring that 'hard to reach groups' were identified and some form of participation is enabled. This was facilitated by the development of a series of guidelines for consideration of specific groups based on characteristics like ethnicity and age. This was especially helpful in assisting staff to look beyond the individuals and groups who were already active in the City's programs. It has also tapped into resources within the organisation to start people thinking of new ways to bring in groups like our seniors and youth, multicultural groups, Indigenous community members and people with disabilities and even so-called 'community activists'. This has had a major influence in the preparations for the revision of the City's Strategic Community Plan- People, Places, Participation (City of Melville 2007)-a project which commenced in October 2011. As a result, a comprehensive and considered engagement strategy was developed, accompanied by a distinct but related communications plan and a stakeholder management plan.

In such applications as the community plan revision, it became more apparent that engagement was not an end in itself. The literature searches and practical cases examined, and perhaps the bias of the researcher, led the investigation into advances into new areas of scholarly and applied pursuit. In terms of cultural change, the role of the engagement coordinator was expanded to accommodate the above mentioned aspects in a new portfolio called social sustainability. This provided the momentum for innovation and creativity both in the conceptual and the cultural aspects of the research. Relatively recent developments in social sustainability allowed the engagement proponents in the organisation to report in ways which decision-makers could relate to- such as- conveying the monetary value of the engagement process (NEF 2008). Such developments are now being trialed at the City to enhance the social and business case for engagement-examples include social impact assessments, and social return on investment. The advantages of such innovation to the field of engagement is that many important impacts on service improvement can be quantified and understood better. Areas such as social cohesion, safety, the cost of not engaging as well as the cost of having to retrofit engagement to avert disaster were now of some prominence in the organisation and continue to gain momentum.

Ultimately, it emerged that aspiring towards an authentic engagement framework with the City's ownership and commitment were a powerful tool in enabling the transition from government to governance. These provide options for guiding the transition towards re-locating citizens at the centre of stakeholder relationships and especially engagement. If anything, this journey has validated the views held by Bracertz & Meredyth (2007, p. 3) that few people are hard to reach if the right approach is used and by Carson (2001) that when engagement methods are fair and deliberative, citizens can surprise even the most skeptical.

6. Conclusion

This has been an attempt to provide a snapshot of a local government in Western Australia that is trying to do things differently in the space of relationships in general and engagement in particular. It is set against a context of rapid social, economic and political change in the state and recognises engagement as an important pillar in the transition required of local governments over the short, medium and long term future.

The development of a Stakeholder Relationships Framework has provided a system for City of Melville staff and elected members to understand and keep pace with its increasingly multi-faceted roles and responsibilities. In general, such a system can have positive implications for the management of organizational performance and greater effectiveness in

service delivery. In particular, this Framework seeks to increase City of Melville's capacity to foster and lead democratic engagement between Council and its Citizens.

The City of Melville aspires to goals of business excellence and strong relationships amongst other values. It is not necessarily competing against other local governments, but rather seeking to align itself to aspirations of best practice that it has set itself. Ultimately, the success of this approach will be dependent on the ability of organisation to commit to a cultural shift. Stakeholders also have a role to play in that they are equal partners in the success of the process. Theirs is the responsibility of honouring the processes that have been agreed on provided this has been negotiated fairly and clearly at the outset.

Some of the findings from this journey were expected, others were not. Provisions were made for the emergence of new avenues to expand and fill perceived gaps in the research endeavour-such as evaluation and reporting. This has led notably to a deeper appreciation of the practical applications of engagement beyond local government such as the not for profit sector-where the default is to empowerment whereas the government approach defaults to the mere provision of information in the first instance. A lot can be learned from these models providing a basis against which to measure our rhetoric from reality.

The complex and varied nature of maintaining relationships in general and engagement in particular means that the Stakeholder Relationships Framework will always be subject to continuous evaluation and evolution. Stakeholder Engagement does not replace the decision-making functions of Council-however it is increasingly being re-positioned as a tool that can complement and even provide greater accountability in the form of checks and balances to enabling the transformation in the way Councils do their business.

7. Recommendations for Policy & Practice

After an honest and thorough examination of the results and their implications, the following recommendations are suggested for future research.

- a. Though attempts at standardisation of engagement practices are both necessary and commendable, local governments should not be discouraged from developing operational variations and tools that reflect the realities that they confront on a daily basis.
- b. More attention needs to be paid and research dedicated to the process of lending structure to the subjectivity of the cultural change that is implied when taking an organisation on this type of journey.
- c. More recognition needs to be given to other relationships that a local government typically embarks on in order to allow engagement to grow unfettered by myriad interpretations.
- d. Although it is recognised that research bodies are doing comprehensive work to bring together knowledge of existing efforts in the field, a more longitudinal approach is required in the future to measure progress or regression against baselines.
- e. More quantitative data is needed to substantiate the monetary and non-monetary value of engagement in order for more recalcitrant Councils to appreciate its benefits and be encouraged to adopt it.
- f. It needs to be recognised that local government is not a leader in engagement. Other sectors such as Not for Profits (Third sector) lead the way in grass roots democracy. Researchers and practitioners are advised to look beyond the institutional and even geographical boundaries (eg local, state and even federal) for direction.

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