

## **May I Have This Dance?**

### **Engaging Communities, Enhancing Governance**

#### **Rural Secretariat Meetings, November 2007**

-“cold as ice”

-“free as a bird”

-“life is like a mountain railroad”

-“he’s as stunned as chunk of wood”

-they go on and on, our speech is peppered with them (oops, there’s another one)

-I’m talking about metaphors,

-we use them as a way to understand people, as a way to make sense of the world

-in fact, sometimes it’s the only thing we remember about a speech, the metaphors

-I’ll do the same here today when talking about community engagement

-my metaphor is the dance

-communities and government, in a dance

-dance is all about process

-and that is what is important in community engagement, where the process is often more important than the outcome; (or, maybe getting the process underway IS the most important outcome - but more on that later)

Why dancing? Well, in terms of a metaphor, I see the engagement of communities as a kind of a dance.

The government has invited the communities to the dance.

The communities came, and stood at the back for quite awhile, suspicious, eyeing their hosts. Nervously fidgeting with whatever was in their pockets. Staring intently at their shoes.

We're at the point where the music has been playing for awhile.

Some folks have already been dancing.

Some are happy about it, want to get back on the floor.

Some say it isn't what it was cracked up to be,

Some are complaining about sore toes

So, the government has asked the communities for the next dance.

For some, it isn't clear what the gov't's intentions are (are they noble? Is there seduction in their eyes? Or are they looking for a long-term relationship?),

Nor are the community's intentions clear (are they just curious? Enamoured with the idea of dancing with what used to be an unattainable partner?),

And we don't always know what the dance will look like, when the two partners get together.

But one thing is clear. It takes two to tango... or waltz... or foxtrot... even a slam-dance takes engagement of sorts.

Both sides need to engage, need to be IN the dance

-All that I say today, goes for both sides

-the government side needs to be there, without hidden agendas, open to whatever happens

-the communities need to be there, and if anything, need to start taking the lead more, teaching the steps to their dance partner, asserting itself, reclaiming its role as dance **partner**, not just a dance **appendage**

If we really want to dance, then the stakes are high on both sides. You can't dance with the same partner over and over, and then just walk off and pretend you don't know them when you see them the next day. At least, my grandmother told me I couldn't do that...

- to structure the chat today, I'll be asking the journalistic questions about this dance -

- why bother dancing in the first place?
- what dance should we do?
- who do we dance with?
- how do we dance?

- what happens if we don't dance?
- what happens after the dance?

...first off...

- **Why dance?**

-like shy young folks at a junior high event, we are weighing the costs and benefits of the dance

-and there are costs to dancing

- just as there are costs to public engagement - there may be some necessity to give up some control, if we allow others access to the table

Why bother getting involved in engaging communities? The old saying is that government rules by the will of the people, or with a mandate from the people.

-Its likely more the case these days that government rules by the apathy of the people. Alas. It must be dispiriting to work in government at times, when there is such a dismissive attitude regarding your work.

But this apathy didn't come from nowhere. There are reasons for it. Decades of reasons. To rectify it will take decades as well. But there are starting points. Which is what we're talking about here.

-so why bother with engagement, with the dance?

- Well, it's the job of government to "bother;" citizen engagement was never meant to be a once-every four years activity. For both sides, it is simply the right thing to do, part of their job. This should be enough.
- Government needs conduits to the people, and vice versa

Big interests create their own conduits... they can have their own routes to power.

The other day, I saw a button: "Politics is the shadow cast on society by business." Cynical? Yes. But it is a danger. It is a danger in a society if a fish plant owner has better access to power than a fishing community.

So folks who govern need connections to the people. And people need connections to their government.

- Getting involved will improve the quality of our information about each other. After all, how can we know the community's agenda without asking.

Remember the book, "Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus?" [related to communication styles and emotional needs].

If we cannot assume what the agenda of close intimates might be, how can we assume we know the agenda of people much more separated from us?

Should there be a book, "Communities are from Mars, Government is from Venus?"

-taking a page from the original book, maybe communities engage in discussions because they want their problems to be acknowledged,  
-while governments engage in discussions because they are asking for quick solutions? For results to parade at appropriate times.

Communities want their problems acknowledged; governments only want to look at solutions? Or is it the other way around?

- The expectation of public input has increased; the bar is higher than before;  
-people are less trusting that "the experts" have public interests at stake, or that "the experts" actually know what they are talking about...

Some kind of interesting expertise deflation has occurred, along with dramatic educational expansion

-it means that we often have more expertise sitting in the audience at a public consultation than there is on the stage. (That's certainly the case here this afternoon, present company excluded...)

-get those experts in the audience, the community, engaged

- Stakeholder engagement is becoming more and more prized in all organizations. Take software companies, for example; the necessary functionality of a software solution is now well beyond the scope of what a company can research on its own. It can't think of all of the possible problems with something...

Rather, they now rely on "stakeholder engagement." Send the programs out there and then listen to the whining about how it doesn't work. (Anybody used Microsoft Vista? Or tried to use it? If so, you're part of their product testing division!)

Likewise, gov't needs to rely on public engagement to monitor and clarify its policy initiatives.

And communities need opportunities to float proposals to policy makers. (outside of the many applications for funds they fill out).

- Just like dancing itself, done properly it will clearly enhance your relationship. Done awkwardly, but genuinely, it is still fun, and is a basis for further conversation. Done very badly, at least it results in some good Facebook photos. But be sure that you are serious about community engagement, on both sides

-it is a high stakes game

- when you ask for a dance, it raises expectations

-one social science theory that looks at the rise of social movements over time, called the J-curve theory, argues that there is a major gap between the growth of expectations versus actual changes in real-life experience

-when promises start to be made, when one is invited to dance, then expectations for the future will rise often faster than one's actual conditions

-that's the nature of the beast; it is easier to raise expectations than it is to make substantive, concrete changes

-the gap between the two on the graph fills up with the seven deadly sins of modern politics: cynicism, apathy, despair, anger, discontent, frustration, and powerlessness

-powerlessness and apathy may be among our most debilitating diseases in terms of our civic health

-if you're serious about public engagement, you'll need to be serious about sharing power, on both sides

-of course, then you can share the blame as well, which is a handy tool at times...

- **What dance should we do?**

-what dance shall we choose?

-when we talk of community engagement, of bringing community and government together, there are a variety of ways that can be done.

-to use a rough schematic, let's arbitrarily say that there are a number of points on a continuum for this interaction...

-starting at

**1) One way communication**

People are informed about what has been decided.

A passive role for the public

This isn't dancing. This is a concert.

**2) Reactive community "consultation"**

A panel of professionals/experts/ bureaucrats consult a self-selected group of people, or an advertised public meeting at a local hotel.

-they answer questions, based on a pre-set agenda

-the process does not concede any share in decision-making

-this is old-fashioned dancing

-one clearly leads, and one follows

### **3) Proactive consultations**

- more attempt to include a wider range of "stakeholders" (an odd term; in law, a stakeholder is a third party who temporarily holds money or property while its owner is still being determined)
- an attempt toward joint decision-making
- but not an equal balance of power on the committee
- watershed management developments, for example
- land-use planning exercises

### **4) Balanced (representative) community consultation**

- equal representation in consultation
- beginning with planning, community members can influence strategic direction
- may not be equal in power, however
- but it is where information dissemination starts to shade into sharing power

### **5) Interactive Partnerships**

- both equal representation and equal power to set the agenda
- actual partnerships, where the members require each other, in order for the process to go forward.
- the groups gather information and learn as a group
- seek out multiple perspectives

-various kinds of knowledge are accepted (and community partners can contribute to the production of knowledge)

## **6) Community mobilization and empowerment**

- community starts to take the lead role
- They develop contacts with external institutions for the resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how those resources are used.
- community management of resources

## **7) Community control**

- Complete community authority for the development of the agenda
- community controls associated public budgets as well
- Community has leading voice in determining priorities in policy
- Community has leading voice in delivery of public services
- maybe like a self-government situation

Where are we on this continuum?

Where do we want to go?

How far do we still have to go?

We're approaching the middle somewhere

-is the rural secretariat somewhere between 3 and 4?

We're integrating community members into the working groups, they're starting to bring forward an agenda

-but they are hampered in a lack of autonomy

-the overall process may still be largely reactive\

-the agenda is put forward, and the regional councils may not have the resources to work on their own agenda, or design their own research

-so that's the dance we're going to do... next...

- **Who do we dance with?**

-the easy answer is:

-ya dance with who brung ya, or with who elected ya...

-but it is more complicated than that

-for example, how do we decide we're actually engaging the community?

-it could be that a governance body thinks it is doing balanced community consultation when it isn't

-who is a community?

-well, we know some things that **aren't** a community

-for example, I don't know of any reasonable social science researcher who will assume that those who participate in a call-in show are representative of a community, or (even worse) of a province

-an assumption of good research, of the production of knowledge, is a solid sampling strategy - choosing your sources in a systematic and objective way  
- so that everyone has the same chance of being chosen  
-how many trees do you sample to figure out the health of a forest? The first few you see? Just the ones visible from the road?

-so the conduits to the community need to be developed, they don't spring, fully-fashioned, from the primordial bog

-and sometimes it takes a whole process to **find** the community

-sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees? (another metaphor)

- maybe sometimes we can't see the community for the individuals...

-there is a research and engagement approach from Australia, for example, often called the "Search Conference" - which involves a very conscious and sometimes laborious process to bring together 30 - 40 people from a community who represent all of the diversities in the community.

-both informal and formal leaders

-a key to its success is how the participants are chosen

-the central concern is the representativeness of those in the hall

-not just the first 15 who signed up

-it would be useful for us to spend more time on initiating the process of figuring out who is the community. And what parts of the community are NOT present at our current consultations.

-how many does it take to make a community (to change a light bulb??)

-how many community members does it take?

(6, 1 to change it and 5 to complain that the new one isn't as bright as the old one)

-how many government bureaucrats?

(still takes 6, 1 to change it and 5 to serve on the ad hoc committee to fill out the paperwork necessary to try and figure out which budget line item it will come under)

(or, 6, but they're involve in an ad hoc committee to draft a public information campaign to convince the public that it is better if they stay in the dark)

(or, Two. One to screw it in and one to screw it up.)

-relates to the next question, the **how do we dance** question

### **How do we dance?**

-this is the big question

-it is the bread and butter of choreographers, for dance

-for community engagement, this question of how to engage is the bread and butter of consultants

-A consultant being someone who comes in, borrows your watch, tells you what time it is, keeps the watch, and charges you a fee.

-how do we engage/dance is an area of true experimentation. Here are some ideas on how to engage with communities (excuse the jargon, if I lapse into it...):

:

- Remember that **process matters more than the product**; both sides need to avoid retreating to our own battlements and re-grouping alone before communicating with the other group;

-don't go to a meeting with your ending communique already written...;  
that isn't good faith dialogue.

Democracy is not a thing we have, it is a process we do.

Don't feel bad about needing to spend time on process.

- Look for what structures, what lines of communication already exist in a community? Start with what we've got in place; organizations that already speak for segments of the community, for example

-a voluntary organization? A church institute? A School with an active school council? Community newspapers? Bulletin boards?

Community cable TV stations? These small public access channels are untapped resources, for televising meetings, linked with telephones they make for interesting community content. I have seen it work. It should be used before the communities all go to satellites...

-anything to get face-to-face interaction

(-but you're going against the stream here; attendance at public meetings has been decreasing for decades, so don't take it personally)

-(you might not get to dance with the whole class, but its still worth dancing with those who come)

- Be realistic about time it takes, about the outcome expected.  
As a guru might say, stay calm, be brave, wait for the signs.
- Why not use market research ideas? Targetted focus groups? Ask people directly to participate? Give them assignments, maybe do an "appreciative inquiry (focus on the best practices in an area; a focus on what works), or "scenario planning" (looking at future possibilities, or the implications of certain strategies)
- Support the development of regional networks that already exist (anyone see a role for the Rural Secretariat and the Zone Boards here...?)

Just the fact that the government still has a space for the Rural Secretariat, for the Zone Boards, is a testament to some willingness to engage - some belief in that process. It's a great start.

- Get youth involved; hire groups of High School students in the summer to gather local histories, suggestions, wisdom of the seniors, take the pulse of the communities in which they live (far more people are likely to talk to the local youth than to outside consultants).

- Be honest about your events. Don't refer to events as "consultation" when they aren't... when decisions are already well and truly structured. Call it dissemination, call it information-sharing, call it a rural junket, whatever.
- Get out of town.
- Experiment with methods. How about a citizen's jury?

-a small group of people who meet over a short period of time (usually between three and five days) to be informed about a specific local issue or topic and to debate the issue in order to come to conclusions or identify solutions.

-Citizens' juries are organized by an agency or organization that wishes to have public input on a particular decision or identified areas for action. Examples of a single-issue topic include a decision on where to site a hospital.

-Membership is drawn from the general public. The format is broadly similar to that of a court case. The jury is presented with evidence and can question and discuss this with those "witnesses" presenting verbal evidence.

-An independent moderator leads the jury in their discussion. Once all the information has been considered and presented and the jury has had sufficient time for deliberation, they make a series of recommendations

- Experiment: Open house/open space events (interactive displays, special events, providing info on an issue/a budget, whatever, bringing a wider variety of people into the discussion); Interactive displays (a display with stickers, feedback, graffiti, whatever to begin a conversation)
- Experiment: How about community animateurs -- help promote and organise the participation of local people in activities that help to make positive changes to their community.

-a focus for increasing community involvement and input in development programmes in their local area such as regeneration schemes, health programmes, or crime initiatives.

-It can also be used to increase local skills and provide employment training. -Animateurs also work with local voluntary groups to help them develop their work.

- we used this in southwest Newfoundland some years ago, in a project called "Sharing Our Future." We hired what we called community communication facilitators

-they organized youth and the communities themselves to produce events, often media-related (cable TV, radio, newsletter, etc.) Their job was to help the communities to speak to themselves.

- Experiment: Community auditing and profiling. You should use a range of methods to gather information about the community. This can include gathering quantitative data about the community, surveys, focus groups and resident interviews, visual methods - for example mapping strengths and weaknesses of the area, neighbourhood walks, and so on. You should design the community engagement methods that you use based on your own local circumstances.
- Experiment: Citizens' panels involve a representative sample of the local population, who have agreed to take part in consultation activity. They can involve hundreds of people (if you have the funds). Potential participants are normally recruited by random sampling, or door to door recruitment. Panel members are then asked to complete surveys on a regular basis. You can choose to ask the whole panel to fill in the survey, or target particular groups - such as older people or minority ethnic groups. Generally, citizens' panels can achieve high response rates and are fairly cost effective. They can also measure whether people's views are changing over time. This can help to assess the impact of service developments.
- Experiment: Community visioning involves a group of people coming together to develop ideas about what they would like their community ideally to be like. After the vision is agreed the group will then work on looking at what needs to be done to bring about that vision and put

this together in an action plan. This is a useful technique to ensure that local people are involved in community regeneration planning.

- Experiment: Action research means that local people or community groups carry out their own research into the needs and experiences of their community. Local people should largely define what research needs to be undertaken, and how this will be done. They are then involved in actually undertaking the research - for example through community surveys, open days and so on. The approach gives local people power in defining the issues that affect them, and the way these should be explored. It is often an effective way of doing local research, as local people often have good links with the community, and can encourage higher rates of participation. It can also help to build community capacity.

- **What happens if we don't dance?**

-Recognize that there will be resistance/apathy

-but what is the option if we don't engage communities?

-let's set up a table ...

-in the following table, I'm assuming that there is a real attempt at engagement, on the part of both parties

	Communities want to get engaged	Communities don't want to get engaged
We provide the support to engage communities	Direction, movement, building of a relationship, understanding	Gov't can still do whatever it chooses, but with more credibility; if you talk to some folks in gov't, this is where they think they are already...
We don't provide the support to engage communities	Government loses face, increased cynicism, possibly activism, loss of credibility; if you talk to some in communities, this is where they think we are now	Both sides lose credibility, poor planning, lack of strategic direction, lack of trust; but, as long as there is a large influx of money from oil, etc., this situation may not have immediate effects, we'll struggle along

-and what happens if one or both groups is pleased..., or not pleased

	Community pleased	Community not pleased
Government pleased	Everyone wins, and you're happy you took the chance	An opportunity for information sharing, to help communities re-adjust their thinking on what is possible, to evaluate their sense of entitlement (assuming that the government is acting in good faith)
Government not pleased	Government needs to re-think its position; after all, the government should be taking direction from the people, shouldn't they? This is a teachable moment for governments (assuming that the community is acting in good faith).	Well, then everyone will likely go back to the previous graph, where neither group is interested in engaging. Until governments and community leaders change.

Which cell are we in?

Which cell do we want to be in?

Which cell has the highest level of danger?

Which cell has the highest likelihood of positive action?

- **what happens after the dance?**

-and how long do I have to dance, the foot-weary among you might wonder?

-well, I should have told you this earlier, I guess

-but it's a relationship, not just a dance

-yes, the "c" word... commitment

A key challenge for public consultation is that once you believe you have the public's consent on an issue - it's not over. You have to keep coming back for their input again, and again, and again. That's how democracy works - it's messy, sloppy, expensive but necessary. For government, it's a risk that must be taken.

An important question for people getting involved in public engagement to ask themselves is: do we have the stomach to last to the end of the game? The process is usually predictable but timelines are not.

Emotions are strong when communities are forced to make choices. There are core community values which may be at stake. They take a long time to tease out, to articulate; change in them takes a long time to change. Look at the role of the fishery today - maybe its 10% of our economy, but its 70% of our culture. It is hard to quantify these core issues, and they are often

driven by emotion - which isn't something to fear, but it is something that needs to be respected.

However, victory is not the end goal. These issues have no end point. So governments and organizations have to communicate continuously even when they have consent from the public.

-for Rural councils, engagement should be an ongoing process

-its in the interests of both to dance

-there are strong impediments to a successful dance

-zone boards are squeezed into an economics and business model, by their funding source

-so who looks after the social?

-Rural Secretariat Councils don't have resources to do things outside of government control

-thus, it is an autonomy issue (and we know about those at Grenfell these days...)

-the regional councils may need some room to mature and develop. In childrearing, researchers talk about the difference between sponsored and unsponsored independence.

-sponsored independence is when children mature by getting more and more responsibility, with the assumption that they will be totally self-controlling in the future so they need to start developing the skills to set their own agendas, etc.

-unsponsored independence is parents hang on to kids, and don't give them increasing amounts of power and control, and when the kids end up leaving, they are unprepared for life on their own.

-I'd call for some sponsored independence; for a process of maturation, where communities are able to engage, to gain more control, to set their agendas, and to mature as centres of community engagement. They shouldn't just be thrown to the coyotes.

Finally, who wouldn't want to see the following:

- A broad range of people participating
- People are trying to solve complex issues
- The engagement process creates vision, achieves results, creates movement and/or change
- Different sectors are included in the process
- There is a focus on collaboration and social inclusion
- The community determines local priorities
- There is a balance between community engagement processes and creating action

In the end, we don't really have much of a choice. We can pay some up front and build a culture of community engagement.

Or we can pay later, with continued Cynicism, Apathy, Despair, Anger, Discontent, Frustration, Powerlessness

On all sides.

But maybe we will see communities and governance actors engaging more  
We're all here, so we must be optimistic about the prospect.

If it happens, it will make for some wonderful grand dancing.  
A right proper scuff of the finest kind...

The band is tuning...