Successful, Effective Public Policy Consultation

I.   INTRODUCTION

Many members of the public are skeptical, not to say cynical, about governments' consultations. Some question their place in a representative democracy. They take the view that politicians are elected to make decisions. If we are unhappy about their decisions, we can replace them at the next election. Others are more open to the notion of a more inclusive, participative public policy process. However, they see governments' track records in making effective use of such processes as spotty, at best.

Public servants, who may be more sensitive to some of the difficulties of consulting effectively, often share the public's suspicions about the efficacy of government consultations. Even viewed sympathetically, governments' track records are not impressive; the skepticism is well founded. There are several reasons for this generally poor performance.

Sometimes things are called consultation which are not, in fact, consultations. This occasionally results from an understandable desire to put the best face on something. More often it is the product of sloppy thinking and poor planning.

In large measure, this reflects the fact that the relevant techniques are relatively new to many governments. Officials simply have not accumulated enough experience with these techniques to have learned how to use them effectively; they are often confused about when and whether they should be used at all. Nor are people more generally agreed on the correct use of key concepts and terms.

In addition, our adversarial political structures and traditions do not encourage people to acknowledge mistakes. In any new undertaking, mistakes will be made. They form the essential basis for learning. However, unless shortcomings are recognized as such, it is very difficult to accept the notion that one might do better the next time, that there is a need for learning to take place. Officials' understandable reluctance to acknowledge error has another unfortunate implication. It makes it almost impossible to talk meaningfully about best practices. The net result is that our understanding of what works and why is very much underdeveloped.

Public servants should not be defensive about this situation. Their lack of understanding about what works, how it works, and why is reflected in the literature on consultation and public participation. There are numerous case studies and anecdotal reports, but each deals with a unique situation. Efforts to identify and discuss general themes or concepts are very rare. The person who wants to design a successful consultation has almost no place to turn. It is this fear of the unknown, as much as anything, that generates the second-guessing and soul searching many officials experience when they have to undertake a consultation.

Consultation should not be all that unfamiliar a notion. The dictionary defines it as: a meeting to deliberate, confer, decide, or plan something. We all consult with other people every day. We solicit and weigh information and advice on how to approach almost any difficult decision we face, any problem we need to solve. In concept, public policy consultation should not be much different. The challenges, however, tend to be more complex. The risk of error appears more daunting because the consequences of error can be serious. The fact is that an even relatively straight-forward public policy consultation is complicated. It typically involves both complex technical matters and intricate group and individual interactions which all contain interpersonal, institutional, and political dimensions. It is very difficult to distinguish the "process" pieces

from the "content" pieces and to understand and manage how they interact to produce success or failure.

The following paper aims at making the unknown more familiar, more knowable, more predictable, and less threatening by:

- explaining what distinguishes a successful, effective consultation[*] from one that falls short of the mark;
- offering a framework that can be used to predict the results a consultation will produce and to plan and manage a consultation so that it does, in fact, produce that result; and
- identifying a number of key consultation planning and design considerations and exploring their implications.

The next section addresses these three matters. Section III, Summary, draws out the five essential characteristics of successful, effective consultations.

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[*] successful, effective consultations are understood as being those which achieve the objectives set for them effectively and economically.

II.   CONSULTATION PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

At its most basic level, any consultation is an exercise in collaborative problem solving. All consultations, irrespective of their scope, scale, or complexity have four major aspects. Knowing what these aspects are and understanding their significance is key to planning and managing consultations that are successful and effective.

The four parts of this section discuss each aspect in turn. The first part, Mandate, addresses establishing an objective for a consultation by examining the context and content of problems and by determining what rules or protocols will govern the consultation. Resources, the second part, discusses how to identify the specific resources of knowledge, skill, and power a consultation will need and how to bring them to bear on the problem. Successful, effective consultation demands that certain key values be shared among participants. They are trust, respect, and commitment. The third part, Values, deals with the importance of these values and explores how to build them. The last part, Process Management, identifies a number of key consultation process management functions and suggests how they should be discharged. It also reviews the key to planning and managing consultations so that they succeed.

A.   MANDATE

There are three major dimensions to the mandate of any consultation: its objective, the problem it is to address, and the rules or protocols under which it will operate. Each of these three dimensions of a consultation's mandate is discussed in one of the three parts of this section.

1.   Setting a Consultation Objective

The single most important difference between a consultation that succeeds and one that fails is how it was initially conceived. Successful consultations take place to solve problems. Those who plan and manage successful consultations understand and accept two things:
1. that they have a problem; and
2. that they need help identifying an effective solution to the problem and / or putting a solution in place.

If a consultation's objective rests on anything other than a genuine need to identify and / or implement an effective solution to a problem, its likelihood of success is slim. Thus, when a consultation starts with the notion that it should be **about** a policy, a program, or an initiative, it is already in trouble.

There are effective, legitimate ways to pursue objectives such as the following, but consultation is not one of them. A consultation is almost certainly doomed if it is intended:
- to test or preview advice people have already decided to render to decision makers;
- to educate the general public or a more specific audience about the complexities of a particular situation;
- to explain what the government plans to do about a problem;
- to illustrate the effectiveness of existing policies, programs, or initiatives;
- to convince individuals or groups to pursue or to not pursue a particular course of action;
- to justify a particular course of action; or
- to achieve any of a host of similar objectives.

The fact that successful consultations have a problem-solving focus does not mean that only one kind of objective can be set for a consultation or that only one kind of consultation can succeed. What determines what consultation objective is achievable is the kind of help that is required to identify and implement an effective solution to the particular problem.

It may be that others have key information about the nature or extent of the problem or about the impact of various possible approaches to its solution. They may have means of accessing such information not readily available to government. Alternately, they may have specialist skills in generating, gathering, or interpreting such information. They may be opinion leaders or decision makers. They may be formally mandated to take part in or to control specific key decision making processes.

To identify and / or implement an effective solution to the particular problem, one must interact in some way with the individuals and groups that have the information, skill, influence, or position you need to access or mobilize. The nature of the problem being addressed and the kind of help required to identify and / or implement an effective solution determine what kind of result the interaction should produce.

In an important sense, consultation **is** this problem-solving interaction. In effect, then, setting the objective for the interaction is equivalent to setting the objective for the consultation. it is the kind of help required to identify and / or implement an effective solution to a specific problem that determines the objective that should be set for a consultation. Broadly speaking, there are four classes of such objectives:
1. seeking INPUT;
2. building MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING;
3. achieving AGREEMENT; and
4. collaborating in the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION of an agreed solution.

It may be that existing organizational authorities, policies, programs, and resources are adequate to both identify and implement an effective solution to a problem; no help is required. In such a situation, there is no reason to undertake a consultation. However, if help is required:

INPUT: It may be that some help is needed to gather specialized information or to interpret its significance. Alternately, help may be needed to assess the impact of various possible courses of action. Once that information or interpretation is mustered, existing authorities, policies, programs, and resources will be adequate to both identify and implement an effective solution to the problem. In these circumstances, the objective of the consultation should be INPUT;

MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING: In other instances, the problem may only be imperfectly understood. It may not be clear what kinds of action might be taken to address it, what the key elements of a solution might be, or even what criteria an effective solution would have to satisfy. Clearly, more than additional information is required. An effective solution will rest on integrating differing perspectives on the problem and its key dimensions.

A similar situation is one in which the problem and the implications of alternate solutions are reasonably well understood. The difficulty lies in implementing the preferred solution. Existing authorities, policies, or programs may not be up to the challenge; help will be needed to broaden or strengthen them. Others will need to be brought on board.

In both cases, building a MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING will be a precondition to identifying and / or implementing an effective solution to the problem. This, then, is the appropriate consultation objective;

AGREEMENT: In still other situations, the problem may be only vaguely understood. It is acknowledged from the outset that others have crucial information about the problem, or that their understanding of the problem or of its key implications, is very different from yours. It may also be that existing authorities, policies, programs, or resources are wholly inadequate to the tasks of identifying and / or implementing an effective solution. This situation calls for more than MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING. AGREEMENT will have to be reached on what the problem is and what would constitute a solution. Parties may also have to agree on what resources are required to address the problem and how those should be brought to bear.

It should be apparent that these broad classes of consultation objectives are not water-tight compartments, that they, in fact, blend into one another. It should be equally apparent that they lie along a conceptual continuum with each stage along the continuum calling for higher levels of integration among the parties than the preceding one;

COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION: This leads logically to the fourth broad consultation objective, the COOOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION of an agreed solution to the problem. Such an objective is appropriate to situations where existing authorities, policies, programs, and resources are wholly inadequate to the task of identifying and implementing an effective solution. The problem demands collaborative efforts on such a scale that only cooperative action by all participants has much likelihood of success.

Exhibit I, following, displays this conceptual continuum of consultation objectives.

EXHIBIT I

| INPUT | MUTUAL | | COOPERATIVE |
| INFORMATION   ADVICE | UNDERSTANDING | AGREEMENT | IMPLEMENTATION |

Exhibit II summarizes three key points to keep in mind about setting consultation objectives.

EXHIBIT II - CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES, THREE KEY POINTS

1. Consultation is not an exercise in institutional altruism or grass-roots democracy, it is a pragmatic way to solve difficult problems.

2. Consultation objectives can be set and met.

3. The nature of the problem determines the kind of objective that should be set for the consultation.

2. Defining the Problem

If the nature of the problem determines what kind of objective should be set for a consultation, then a solid understanding of the problem is clearly at the heart of consultation process planning and management. It is helpful to think about problems has having two distinct dimensions. The first, problem content, has to do with the problem itself, the domain of knowledge of which it is a part and its inherent complexity. The second, problem context, is concerned with the problem's relationship to other problems and to its ultimate solution.

a. Problem content

Some problems are more difficult than others. They may be difficult because they call for sophisticated analytical techniques or because they lie at the frontiers of our understanding. Often, problems appear difficult simply because they are not part of our routine work. Their difficulty has as much to do with unfamiliarity as with absolute difficulty. However, there are some problems, particularly those calling for the creation of new knowledge or understanding, which are inherently difficult.

Other problems are difficult because they are complex, requiring the integration of knowledge from several different or even entirely unrelated disciplines. Or perhaps the problem is actually a group of related problems, where the solution of one has an impact on some or all of the others. it is more accurate to regard such problems as complex rather than as difficult *per se*. Still other problems are difficult because they have important moral, values, or emotional dimensions.

Whatever the kind of difficulty, most people readily recognize problems which are at the edge of, or beyond, their competence to solve. They know they need help to deal with the problem's content. How much of what kind of help they need significantly influences the consultation objective they set, be it INPUT, MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING, or AGREEMENT.

b. Problem context

Problems do not exist in a vacuum. All exist in a broader human context. That context will have several dimensions including institutional, legal, social, cultural, and others. That context also influences the objective that should be set for a consultation. In essence, this is a question of how ultimate decisions will be made about which solution is best and about how the chosen solution will be put in place. It is thus closely related with whether existing authorities, policies, programs and / or resources can actually implement the preferred solution.

Circumstances in which existing authorities, and so on, are sufficient to allow us to implement the chosen solution, tend to produce an appropriate consultation objective that lies closer to the INPUT end of the continuum. Where all are insufficient and significant help will be needed to implement the solution, an objective closer to the other end of the continuum is called for.

Because problems exist in a context, solving problems has impacts throughout the social, political, cultural, and institutional systems of which they are a part. A helpful way to think about any problem's context is by imagining what would change if the problem were solved. If the problem went away, changes would take place in those systems. What would those changes be? How significant would they be, how widespread? Relatively few changes of relatively little significance to only one or two systems tends to move the appropriate consultation objective toward the INPUT end of the continuum. A large number of significant changes in several

systems suggests a consultation objective closer to the COOPEREATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the spectrum.

Another important dimension to consider is how much attention the problem and its solution will attract from decisions makers. Senior people are busy and have limited attention to turn to any one problem. A consultation may identify the perfect solution to a difficult problem. But if solving the problem is not a priority for decision makers, they may not get around to sanctioning implementation. An unimplemented solution is no solution; the problem continues to exist.

The assessment that needs to be made here is highly subjective and reflects the style and interests of individual decision makers as much as the nature of the problem itself. However, the busier decision makers are and the less likely they are to find a particular problem intrinsically interesting, the more the appropriate consultation objective moves toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the continuum. There are at least three plausible explanations for this.

The first has to do with confidence. The consultation has brought together a number of people having different perspectives but sharing a common interest in solving a problem. If they agree that a particular solution is best, decision makers can be reasonably confident that it is at least a good solution and should probably be tested. The second is closely related and has to do with pooling the risk of error. If mistakes are made, they will be seen as having been made in good faith and after careful consideration. Such mistakes do not often result in real embarrassment or blame. The third is more purely political. It is hard to veto cooperative action. Most people prefer to be, and prefer to be seen as being, team players. In addition, it is hard for decisions makers to know when uncooperative behaviour will come back to haunt them. Their inclination, thus, will be to want to go along with the group. All of this, however, necessitates there being a group with which one can go along. This is consistent with an objective in the AGREEMENT part of the continuum and inconsistent with an objective at the INPUT end.

3. Determining Protocols

Protocols are essentially the rules under which the consultation proceeds. In this context, there are three questions to consider:

1. What kinds of protocols are required?
2. What should the specific content of each protocol be?
3. How should decisions about these two matters be made?

Exhibit III, following, identifies the topics protocols typically address. Each consultation, however, is somewhat unique, reflecting its objective and the needs and preferences of the planner / manager and participants. Some generalizations, however, are helpful.

All consultations require protocols that address the matters in Group A. Unless people know what problem the consultation is meant to address, they will be unable to provide very meaningful help. The same will be the case unless people clearly understand what kind of help they are being asked to give. Without a relatively clear understanding of timeframes, they may be unwilling to commit to helping at all. They may be equally unwilling to help unless the planner / manager can indicate when s/he anticipates ultimate decisions will be made or explain what will be done with the information they provide.

EXHIBIT III - Consultation Protocols

Group A

- Agenda - the problem, its major component parts or the issues that make it up, and the order in which they will be addressed

- Timeframes and time limits

- Progress reports and feedback

- Ultimate decision making process

Group B

- Operating definition of consensus

- Representation, membership, attendance, and alternates

- Reporting back, binding, and final ratification

- Confidentiality and media relations

- Caucuses

- Minutes and record keeping

- Process management functions and responsibilities

- Research, secretariat, and other staff support

- Facilitation and process support / expertise

- Costs and reimbursement

- Evaluation

- Defaults and fall-backs to other processes

- Monitoring and implementation roles and responsibilities

The consultation planner / manager should be as explicit on each of these matters as possible. Its importance for the success of the consultation lies in the fact that it demonstrates respect for those with whom you are interacting. In addition, putting some effort into thinking through the process shows that you take it seriously. People are likely to reciprocate in kind.

It should go without saying that the commitments the planner / manager makes on protocols should be honoured. For example, if circumstances change so that timeframes cannot be met, those consulted are entitled to be kept informed. If the definition of the problem shifts, as often happens in response to information gathered during the consultation, participants are entitled to know that this has happened, how, and why.

While all consultations need explicit protocols to deal with all the Group A matters, the same is not true of the matters addressed in Group B. To illustrate, if the problem is relatively well defined and the objective is simply INPUT, questions regarding membership and alternate representation will rarely if ever arise. There is probably no need for a protocol to address these matters. On the other hand, if the problem is complex and the objective is AGREEMENT, all participants will want to know who else is participating. Agreement implies committing the groups represented to the terms of an agreement. Unless participants actually represent a specific group and have the authority to bind their constituency, other participants will be unwilling to "do a deal." If the objective really is agreement and all those engaged do not have the authority to make an agreement, then either the objective, the participants' authority, or the actual participants will have to be changed if the consultation is to succeed.

This brings us to the question of how decision should be made about which protocols are required and what their actual content should be.

In general, as the objective moves from the INPUT end of the continuum toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end, participants attach greater significance to the specific content of each protocol. Again, the AGREEMENT objective serves to illustrate the point. People will not be willing to work towards an agreement unless they believe that their views will receive full and fair consideration. They will have to be comfortable that the rules governing the process are not biased in favour of some other participant. If the objective is to reach an agreement, questions about what protocols are required and what should be their specific content will need to be reviewed, discussed, and agreed by all participants.

That does not mean that the planner / manager has no role in determining protocols. As initiator of the consultation, you can probably predetermine many of the Group A protocols. In fact, the nature of the problem and its associated decision making process may demand this. Those you wish to consult can always press for changes if they believe that the protocols are unreasonable or unrealistic. Ultimately, they can refuse to take part if they regard your definition of the problem or the timeframes as unacceptable. As to the Group B protocols, participants may well welcome suggestions about which ones are thought to be needed and what their content might be.

However, the planner / manager must be prepared for participants' comments and suggestions on protocols and display flexibility in this area. The amount of flexibility called for will be roughly proportional to how close to the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the continuum the specific consultation's objective lies.

Exhibit IV, following, summarizes the key questions the planner / manager must address about the mandate of a consultation.

EXHIBIT IV – Mandate, Key Questions

1. What problem am I trying to solve?

2. Do I need help identifying and / or implementing an effective solution?

3. What kind of result should the consultation (problem solving interaction) produce so that an effective solution to the problem can be implemented?

EXHIBIT IV – Mandate, Key Questions, continued

3. How difficult is the problem content?

4. How challenging is the problem context?

5. What is the appropriate way to decide what protocols are required and what their content should be?

B. RESOURCES

This brings us to the question of who to engage in the consultation, of who should participate in the problem solving interaction. Not surprisingly, the short answer is that those who have resources to bring to bear on the problem should be engaged. In other words, those who can make a substantial contribution to identifying and / or implementing an effective solution need to be engaged in the consultation.

In general, there are two different kinds of problem solving resources. The first, knowledge and skill, has to do with information about the problem and its impacts and includes technical expertise in developing, collecting, or analyzing such information. This class of resources also includes insight into the impacts or implications of various possible solutions and also consultation skills.

The second kind, power and influence, has primarily to do with the ability to implement a solution once it has been identified. Here we are interested in formal decision making, leadership of key groups or interests, and influence. Financial resources are another resource of a similar kind. To illustrate, money will be needed to implement to solution or to help develop and evaluate potential solutions.

Some individuals and many groups have resources of both kinds. Thus, it is not always easy in practice to distinguish between specific participants' resources of knowledge and power. Knowledge, when well recognized, tends to generate influence and thus power. For convenience, however, it is helpful to distinguish between the more technical / informational resources and those that have more to do with influence and control.

In addition, some resources may be unique to specific individuals. Influence is often one such resource. Others may be controlled by groups or organizations. We are interested in resources of power and influence that can be brought to bear by both individuals and groups.

1. Knowledge and Skill

One of the most crucial aspects of planning and managing a successful consultation is ensuring that the right resources of knowledge and skill are brought to bear on the problem. You need people who have some direct experience of the problem, understand why it is a problem, and have given it enough thought to have some ideas about what a solution might look like. For example, if the problem is being experienced primarily by steel companies, such companies should be engaged. Depending on the specific problem, you may also want to engage some or all of workers, suppliers, shippers, federal and provincial industry specialists, local government leaders, banks and other lenders, underwriters, security brokers, energy providers, university

engineering and architecture schools, automobile, railroad construction companies, pipeline construction companies, and so on. You also need people with skills in dealing with similar types of problems. If the problem has an important micro-economic dimension, for example, one would want to bring that expertise to bear.

Problems with which public servants typically deal have a significant public policy dimension. It may thus be important to engage some people skilled in dealing with public policy problems. The solution of many such problems depends on reconciling competing interests and views. One must thus be careful not to consult only those who see a problem from the same perspective. The purpose is to ensure that you identify and correctly interpret all key data and information about the problem and its potential solutions.

Of course, the specific knowledge and skill required to identify possible solutions and then select the best among them is very much a function of the specific problem being addressed. In many instances, identifying the sources of problem-specific knowledge and skill will not prove difficult. As the consultation planner / manager, you will often have considerable expertise in the field yourself. You will also know many of the other people who have relevant expertise. However, there is another kind of knowledge and skill which is frequently overlooked. This has to do with cooperative problem solving. Exhibit V identifies some of the consultation skills effective participants need.

Exhibit V - Some Essential Consultation Skills
• An ability to identify and articulate the core interests or needs an acceptable solution should serve.
• A willingness to accept that other participants also have needs and interests that must be served.
• A capacity to participate constructively in developing alternate solutions to the problem.
• An understanding that a solution that will not / cannot be implemented is not a solution.
• An ability to avoid win-lose behaviours.

Strong advocates have a contribution to make to any consultation. Having the problem and the alternatives sketched starkly can be very helpful. However, participants must be able to get beyond advocacy of pet solutions. Successful consultations demand knowledge and skill in how to consult every bit as much as knowledge and skill in the content of specific problems. The planner / manager must seek out people who bring these resources to the consultation just as actively as those who bring more content-specific resources.

2.   Power or Influence

To find out about how a problem is perceived by owners of small businesses, manufacturers, or workers, one need to talk to owners of small businesses, manufacturers, or workers. However,

successful consultations do not engage just any small business owners, manufacturers, or workers.

People form associations, federations, unions, cooperatives, and other organizations specifically to represent their views and interests. Leaders of such groups are often very well informed about the view of their members as well as being highly influential opinion leaders. Beyond influence, many such groups enjoy some measure of formal decision making authority. Professional associations are one such example. In some circumstances, unions and cooperatives also fulfil this role.

These groups and their leaders are often skilled at media and public relations. They also often have direct access to politicians and senior advisors which can be as effective as a government organization's internal communications and authority channels. A solution developed in isolation from these formally constituted groups has little likelihood of being implemented. This situation can be viewed either positively or negatively.

If such bodies view the proposed solution as acceptable and work for its approval, ratification by decision makers is very much facilitated. Alternately, if they oppose the proposed approach, winning approval will be an uphill battle, at best. In either event, the leaders of these groups command some of the resources of power or influence that the consultation needs if it is to succeed.

Beyond formal associations and interest or advocacy groups, in many fields of public policy there are institutes, widely regarded academics, university faculties and research centres, professional advisors or consultants, and other specialists who are often looked to for advice or comment on specific policy initiatives. Like associations, their access to media and senior decision makers makes them another valuable resource of power or influence to be engaged in a well-planned consultation.

Beyond the kinds of resources which need to be brought to bear, there is the question of how resources should be engaged.

3.   Some Practical Design Guidelines

Where the objective of the consultation is INPUT, either in the form of information or advice, the planner / manager can often unilaterally determine who should be engaged and how. S/he can probably seek information from recognized experts or opinion leaders in a series of one-on-one discussions. Participants may be curious about who else is being engaged and what their views are. They will certainly want to be advised of the results of the consultation. Although they may appreciate, they are unlikely to expect, face-to-face interaction with other participants.

If only information is being sought, the planner / manager can be somewhat arbitrary about how the problem is defined, how the alternate solutions are framed, and what criteria are established for selecting among the alternatives.

This same latitude does not exist, however, as the objective moves closer toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the spectrum. For example, if the objective is mutual understanding, then face-to-face interaction among participants is essential. Having the planner / manager report to one group that another group holds certain views is not good enough. Participants will want to hear those views and the thinking behind them expressed directly by the

group's representative. Participants will also expect to influence how the problem is defined, how alternative solutions are framed, and particularly how the criteria an acceptable solution would have to satisfy are defined.

If the objective is AGREEMENT or COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION, participants will even want a say in who else is at the table. Groups will be very reluctant to work toward an agreement with other groups that they regard as having no legitimate place at the table. They will be even less likely to want to share implementation roles with such a group. This, obviously, can present a difficult challenge for the consultation planner / manager with consultation objectives in this part of the continuum. Addressing these challenges, and the ultimate success of the consultation, hinge on ensuring that:

- everyone engaged brings essential resources of knowledge, skill, and / or power to the table;
- all accept the definition of the problem as legitimate;
- all accept the criteria that an effective solution must meet as being appropriate and comprehensive; and
- everyone engaged is prepared, on balance, to support an agreed solution.

The only way to bring this about is for participants to be in the same room at the same time. They need to interact directly in order to share perspectives and develop the required amount of common ground. As that takes place, it is inevitable that decisions made early in the planning process will have to be revisited. The definition of the problem content and context may well shift. This will have implication for both the objective and the resources of knowledge, skill, and power the consultation will need in order to succeed. This is why planning and managing consultations with objectives lying in the AGREEMENT / COOPERATIVE IMPLEMETNATION part of the continuum is often an iterative process. Exhibit VI identifies three practical implications.

Exhibit VI - Iterative Consultation Planning

- The initial definition of the problem will necessarily be tentative.

- Resources of knowledge, skill, and power beyond those initially engaged may prove to be required.

- Solutions quite different from those initially conceived may prove to come closest to meeting the needs and interests of all participants.

One final word on resources. It may be that some of those who should be engaged, either because of knowledge or of influence, lack the financial resources to do so. It may be necessary to take this fact into account in designing the consultation and to find appropriate ways to level the playing field

Exhibit VII, following, identifies key factors about resources the planner / manager must take into account.

EXHIBIT VII – Resources, Key Factors

1. Participants bring relevant knowledge and understanding of the problem.

2. Participants bring diverse perspectives.

3. All those with a clear and significant stake are represented.

4. Each participant is accepted by every other participant as having a clear and significant stake.

5. Participants have relevant analytical and group dynamics skills.

6. Each participant brings influence and uses it appropriately.

7. Time and financial resources and demands are managed equitably.

C.   VALUES

The success of any collaborative problem solving interaction depends on participants sharing and manifesting certain values. The crucial ones are trust, respect, and commitment.

Irrespective of the consultation objective, participants must trust the planner / manager not to use the information they share to the detriment of their interests. As the objective moves toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the continuum, participants interact not only with the planner / manager but also with other participants. They must also trust other participants to not misuse the information they provide. This again can pose a significant challenge for the planner / manager, particularly when participants bring very different perspective or experience to the table. There may, as well, be a history of adversarial relations and the distrust they breed to take into account.

The protocols should establish a framework for confidence in the integrity of the process and thus a basis for trust among participants. However, trust only develops over time and with experience of trust-worthy behaviour on the part of other participants. Trust, thus, demands attention throughout the interaction. In extreme circumstances it may call for the use of specific techniques to build levels of trust within the group so that it can function effectively.

Respect can be equally problematic. Where groups engaged in the consultation have a long history of adversarial relations, there may not be enough mutual respect to achieve COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION or even AGREEMENT. But this is not always the case. Traditional adversaries often develop a grudging respect for each other which allows them to work together on at least some problems. However, objectives toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end of the spectrum call for high levels of mutual respect among participants. The planner / manager should not take these levels for granted.

Respect, like trust, is nurtured by appropriate protocols. Outlawing one-up-manship and point-scoring can make an important contribution. Often, building respect, like trust, is simply a matter of time and positive experience. Exhibit VIII identifies some of the positive behaviours one would want to observe.

Exhibit VIII - Evidence of Mutual Respect

- Participants are open and up front with each other.

- Participants are not working, nor do they suspect other participants of working, to hidden agendas.

- Participants demonstrate a willingness to listen to, and take full account of, the views of other participants.

- Participants accept the underlying needs and objectives of other participants as legitimate and as being based in good faith.

Ensuring that all participants have a material contribution to make to the solution of the problem, as discussed under Resources, will also help.

If it becomes apparent that sufficient levels of trust and respect do not exist among participants, consideration can be given to a less ambitious objective. For example, one could ease expectations back from achieving AGREEMENT to simply building MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING. Where people have been working together for some time, this option should only be adopted as a last resort and after a full discussion of the trust and respect issue with participants. However, it is an option.

Successful consultations demand another kind of respect. It is respect for the process itself. This is closely related to the third critical value participants must share and manifest: commitment. The kind of commitment required is best understood as commitment to the success of the problem solving interaction. Phrasing the matter in this way provides a helpful indication of how commitment comes into play.

Where participants are not committed to identifying and implementing an effective solution to the problem, there is little likelihood of their contributing to the hard work of doing so. Scoring points against other participants, disrupting the group's efforts, and trying generally to derail the process become attractive tactics. This is particularly the case where there is a history of adversarial relations or where the problem may demand difficult trade-offs.

Where, on the other hand, participants see a solution to the problem as being highly relevant to their needs and interests, they are going to want to see it solved. Cooperative problem solving begins to look attractive if they also understand that a solution which meets only their needs stands little chance of implementation. Under these conditions, there is a good possibility that they will commit to developing and implementing an effective solution.

The extent to which participants need to share the values of trust, respect, and commitment in order for a specific consultation to succeed, like the other aspects of consultation management, tends to increase as the objective moves along the continuum from INPUT-type objectives toward the COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION end. To simply gather information and / or advice from experts and opinion leaders, only modest levels of these values are required. In most instances, levels equivalent to ordinary civility will probably suffice. For objectives further in the direction of COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION, however, higher levels of trust, respect, and commitment become critical to the success of the consultation. The planner /

manager should be less confident that ordinary civility will produce success. Specific measures may be needed to test existing levels and to encourage their development where they are found wanting.

This is an important part of why, if the objective lies beyond the INPUT part of the continuum, all participants have to accept the definition of the problem as legitimate if the consultation is to succeed. This is also why it is important for participants to have a role in defining the need for, and the content of, the protocols when the consultation objective is in this portion of the spectrum. When participants play a role in designing the process, they develop a sense of ownership, they see the process as theirs. It is natural that they would be more committed to its ultimate success than they would be if the process had simply been laid-on by someone else. In addition, working together to frame a definition of the problem and to define the protocols is often useful in itself. People have the chance to build trust and response when the issues may not be so critical as the substantive mattes will which be discussed as the consultation progresses.

Exhibit IX identifies the key questions the planner / manager must answer about values.

EXHIBIT IX – Values, Key Questions

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1. Are the levels of trust and respect among participants sufficiently high to achieve the objective?

2. Are reasonable standards of fairness being observed?

3. Are participants open, up-front, and honest in their dealings?

4. Are participants demonstrating a willingness to listen and a sensitivity to the needs and interests of other participants?

5. Is there explicit agreement to work together to find a solution to the problem?

D.   PROCESS MANAGEMENT

As should be apparent, consultations, even unsuccessful ones, do not just happen. They require careful design and planning. Beyond planning, successful consultations require the discharge of a host of process management functions.

1.   Process Management Functions

While there is some variation among different consultations, almost all require the more or less explicit discharge of the process management functions identified in Exhibit X.

Exhibit X - Process Management Functions

- convening
- visioning and strategizing
- facilitating
- defining the criteria an acceptable solution must meet

Exhibit X - Process Management Functions, continued

- gathering information

- working through task forces

- evaluating alternatives

- mediating

- networking

- maintaining / building external support

- monitoring implementation

Someone, for example, will have to convene the consultation, that is someone will have to engage the participants. Similarly, someone will need a vision of where the consultation is headed and a strategy for getting it there. In large part this is the planning work involved in drafting a preliminary definition of the problem, defining an appropriate objective for the consultation, identifying resources / participants, and developing protocols. Someone will also need have to provide at least minimal secretariat support.

In addition, someone will have to identify the key criteria a solution has to meet. Information will need to be gathered and analyzed. There may be a need to establish and take part in task forces to deal with particular aspects of the problem or to assess potential solutions. Where conflict levels are high, someone may have to mediate disputes and purpose resolutions. There may also be a need to articulate a consensus that synthesizes disparate views.

Participants' constituencies will need to know what progress is being made and understand the reasons underlying any trade-offs that have to be made. To ensure continuing support for the cooperative problem solving effort, someone will have to tend these communications channels. There may also be a need to build support for the group's work beyond its immediate constituent organizations. Finally, there may be a need to monitor implementation of any agreements. If agreements perform differently from how participants understood that they would, it is important that there be a mechanism to rapidly address the difference.

As with the other aspects of the consultation, who should carry out each process management function and how explicitly responsibility should be assigned is very much a function of the consultation's objective.

Where the objective is INPUT, the planner / manager can safely discharge these functions. There should be a clear plan for how s/he will do so simply for good management. However, there will probably be minimal need to specifically discuss these matters with participants. They should probably be told what criteria the solution must satisfy and how they will be kept advised of the effort's progress. However, they will probably have little interest in what is being done with the other process management functions.

Where the objective is more ambitious, participants will be more interested in the process management functions. The planner / manager should be prepared to explain what s/he has in mind. As the objective nears the AGREEMENT part of the continuum, participants will need to

have meaningful input into how the process is being managed. In this segment of the spectrum, consideration should be given to using a third-party facilitator. This is particularly important if the planner / manager believes that the convening agency has important interests to be protected or promoted.

Use of a facilitator places process management fully under the control of the group and frees the planner / manager to play the advocate role that agency interests may demand. It also removes any suspicion that s/he is exercising subtle influence over the management of the process to suit the convening agency's agenda.

Beyond input into how these functions will be discharged, there is direct participation in carrying them out. Where the objective is COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION, it is almost essential that the group itself:
- take direct responsibility for process management; and
- share responsibility for specific functions among participants.

The reasons for this have already been discussed. High levels of commitment are a precondition of COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION. Commitment is built by ownership of the process. In addition, participants must exhibit high levels of trust and respect in this part of the continuum. Sharing process management responsibilities both builds and evidences the required levels of trust and respect.

2.   Consistency

Consistency is the last characteristic of successful, effective consultations. In many ways, it is the acid test. The concept has already been discussed in several specific contexts. Essentially, consistency says that all aspects of consultation planning and management must be carried out in a way that is consistent with the consultation's objective.

Exhibit XI, following, displays all the aspects and sub-aspects of consultation against the continuum of objectives.

Where the objective is INPUT, participants need to share relatively little common ground. thus, the planner / manager is more or less free to define the problem as s/he sees it, to establish the protocols, to determine who should be engaged and how, to assume that ordinary civility reflects adequate levels of trust and respect, to not devote much effort to building participant commitment to success, and to directly discharge all process management functions.

This does not mean that the planner / manager can treat participants in a cavalier fashion. There is still has a problem with which s/he needs help. In asking for help, courtesy demands that people helping receive an explanation of:
- how you see the problem;
- what you propose to do with their advice / input;
- who will be making ultimate decisions;
- what criteria a solution will have to meet;
- what you understand the timeframe for decision making to be;
- how they will be kept advised of your progress; and
- any changes that take place during the process, why they have occurred; and what their anticipated impact is.

EXHIBIT XI - CONSISTENCY BETWEEN THE CONSULTATION OBJECTIVE AND EACH ASPECT OF A CONSULTATION

	INPUT INFORMATION ADVICE	UNDERSTANDING	MUTUAL AGREEMENT	COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION
MANDATE Objective Problem Protocols				
RESOURCES Knowledge and Skill Power				
VALUES Trust and Respect Commitment				
PROCESS MANAGEMENT Functions Consistency				

RELATIVELY LESS   **COMMON GROUND AMONG PARTICIPANTS**   RELATIVELY MORE

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At the other end of the continuum, COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION of an agreed solution demands that all participants share a highly specific understanding of what the problem is. They must also see the agreed solution as being the best, from their own respective points of view, that could have been achieved under the circumstances. All must fully accept each of their implementation partners as having a material contribution to make. Very high levels of trust and mutual respect are required. Had they not been deeply committed to the success of the collaborative problem solving effort, they would never have reached this point. Beyond commitment, all will have had to play a meaningful role in defining the protocols, in seeing to it that they were honoured, and in discharging several different process management functions.

To achieve intermediate objectives, each condition has to be met to a lesser extent. The extent to which is has to be satisfied is proportional to the distance along the continuum, from INPUT to COOPERATIVE IMPLEMENTATION, that objective lies. In other words, successful, effective consultations are characterized by consistency between their objective and all aspects of how they are planned and managed.

Managing a consultation, once it has been planned and is underway, is essentially the business of managing consistency. One must constantly monitor what is taking place. It is imperative that the consistency designed into the interaction is maintained as it unfolds. The consistency imperative is summarized in Exhibit XII.

EXHIBIT XII – The Consistency Imperative

> Success depends absolutely on the actions of each participant being consistent with his or her stated objective(s) and the actions of the group remaining consistent with the objective of the consultation.

III.   SUMMARY

Five characteristics distinguish successful, effective consultations from those which fall short of the mark:

1. There is a problem that calls for help in either or both of identifying and implementing an effective solution.

2. There is a clear consultation objective that reflects the nature of the problem and the implementation of its solution.

3. All aspects of the consultation are planned and managed to achieve consistency between participants' actions and the consultation's objective.

4. The required resources of knowledge, skill, and power are identified and engaged.

5. Participants trust and respect each other and are committed to the success of their efforts at collaborative problem solving.

Ensuring that your consultation manifests these characteristics is a not insignificant challenge. However, knowing what you are looking for significantly improves the likelihood that you will ultimately find it.