

Substantive consultation

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I will start by acknowledging the central importance of ensuring that the benefits of being members of this extraordinarily wealthy Western Australian society are also accessible to the Noongar people of this region and other Aboriginal peoples of the State, as well as to members of the ethnic minorities who help make up its increasingly diverse society.

I want to set out what I have learned about principles for effective, substantive consultation from my long engagement with Aboriginal Australian groups and communities across the country, on a wide range of issues. In doing so, I want to thank the many Aboriginal people who have carefully and thoughtfully given me key insights into what it is like to be on the wrong side of poor, misguided and mis-communication, and conversely into the possibilities offered by truly effective consultation. While I have not worked specifically with migrant ethnic minorities as such, I hope that those of you from, or working with, these groups find resonances with what I have to say in your own knowledge and experience.

In the short time I have available this morning, I will focus on a set of what I see as key features of what I am calling here 'substantive consultation' – that is, consultation which is not tokenistic, but whose purposes, principles and methodologies are given substantive attention and content, and are built into organizational cultures as part of core business.

Purposes – what are consultations for?

'Consultation' is one of those important but also overused cover terms which can mean everything to everyone, and therefore nothing substantive to anyone.

It is all-too-often used, for example, to refer to processes in which staff are sent out to inform community groups about decisions already substantively taken. Or, another example, I am sure that we have all seen or even participated in so-called 'community consultations' that have amounted to little more than desultory engagement at public meetings with a few attendees of unknown status within the relevant group or community.

These forms of consultation seem mainly established to provide a limited form of legitimacy to proposed actions by an agency or organisation.

However, my own experience is that paying attention to consultation as a key engagement strategy rather than just a process that has to be gone through for form's sake not only benefits the target group or community, but also the organisation or agency.

Substantive consultations can be the 'rubber on the road' for any organisation involved in addressing issues faced by Aboriginal or ethnic minority groups – like a good set of tires they give traction. They can be the crucial link between the corporate vehicle and the social terrain; can give direction to where you are going; can assist in dealing with what can be steep learning curves; and help smooth out the inevitable bumps.

Substantive consultation practices which truly gain traction with and thus engage the target group can not only improve the quality of the information flow from agency or organisation to the target group – they can also provide a key element to monitoring and accountability frameworks, and perhaps most significantly a highly productive means of feeding views from those who are directly impacted into program development and design.

Subject matter – communicating underlying assumptions

In this workshop, we are focused on consultations potentially taking place across social and cultural barriers, including linguistic ones. It is fundamentally important in these circumstances not to take for granted that our own implicit knowledge about how things work is shared by those with whom we are trying to communicate. Generally, indeed, it is not.

What the 'rules of the game' are in whatever issue it is we are consulting about – such as what government's role is, and why it wants to do something about the issue at hand, the political, economic and other factors around the issue, and indeed what our own roles and capacities are to institute any changes – may be quite opaque to those with whom we are consulting.

In these circumstances, I have found it very helpful to move beyond simply telling people 'facts' of one kind or another (e.g. 'the government wants to build this road to encourage development'), to also attempting to explain something of the underlying rationales, principles, and causes of these facts (e.g. what the government means by the concept of 'development'). This is what I as an anthropologist would term laying out something of the underlying 'cultural logic' of the matter at hand.

I have found people with whom I have been consulting on a wide range of issues to be very receptive to such an approach. I think this is for a number of reasons. It demonstrates a degree of transparency – being seen as opening up discussions, not trying to hide things. It engages people (including intellectually) and demonstrates that they are being respected, not patronized. And it deepens their understanding of the matter, and helps them therefore to come to informed views about it – and this can only improve the quality of the feedback to the organisation or agency concerned.

Contexts – where, with whom and how does consultation take place?

Like the way in which so many of us here have this implicit and often unexamined knowledge about the 'rules of the game' – after all, it is so often our game – we also have unexamined assumptions about the contexts in which we should consult, and with whom we should do so.

While public meetings can sometime be fractious and worse, by and large being out there in front of an audience keeps those conducting consultations in their comfort zones. They don't have to have any real interpersonal interaction, and if things get tough they can hide behind meeting protocols. It can also make it hard to gauge or even hear diversities of opinion, including from those whose opinions it may be crucial to hear.

For these and other reasons, I have found that the quality of consultations is substantially better working with smaller 'focus groups'. I have found it a useful strategy to hold a larger meeting as the culmination of a series of such focal group consultations, where findings are fed back to the wider group and, hopefully, agreement reached on directions to take.

Depending on the people concerned, these focus group meetings may be best based on gender, on age groupings, on family groups, on residential communities, and so forth. Sessions may be held in public spaces, or in people's homes, or in culturally 'safe' places, as the case may be.

However, when considering where and with whom to hold small group consultations with those from other cultures, it is important to realize that there may be a 'politics of place' to take account of, or of gender, or of generations and so forth, which are implicit knowledge amongst members of the group concerned but which you don't share – the mirror image of what I mentioned before in laying out how we communicate the particular matter. Equally, it is important to take care not to make prior 'common knowledge' assumptions about who the relevant people to consult with are, who has authority to make decisions, and so on.

An outsider can never know such things in advance, so it is important if at all possible to work with local people in preparing for consultations. This is another component of the preparatory work that I mention later.

In terms of how consultation meetings should be held, there are no simple check lists here. But I will say that in my own experience, by far the most productive consultations have been those which have created a 'space' in which people involved have been able to actively, often proactively, contribute their own perspectives, concerns, and indeed solutions.

This requires methodologies and strategies to be put in place for consultation sessions that establish them as more of a dialogue than simply an information session followed by questions-and-answers.

This assumes of course that the consultations are not being held merely to window dress a pre-existing decision or a particular course of action. It also assumes that the organizational culture of the agency concerned is open to incorporating perspectives from clients – that is, that it can support reframing "your problem which we are telling you how we will address", to "our common problem for us to work together on how to address".

Language / languages of communication

Here, I will focus particularly two senses of the term 'language'. The first, most obviously when working with many in ethnic minority groups and with remote-dwelling Aboriginal people in particular, is that English may be at best a second language. So, it may be essential when meeting with such groups to use translators, or where there is literacy in the other language to use written and other materials in it.

But this does not remove the onus of effective communication from those undertaking the consulting to the translator. On the contrary, it places if anything a greater onus on the former to work to ensure that what they have to say can be meaningfully translated into the language concerned. I know this to be a particular issue when working with Aboriginal languages, but suspect it is a more general problem. Again, preparation is essential, working with the translator to ensure that the key concepts are understood, and can be properly communicated, and if there are concepts that are not directly comparable across languages (for example those to do with health and disease), workarounds are developed.

In a second sense of the term 'language', it is also crucial to ensure that the language being used (in whatever medium of communication) is accessible and not overly technical or full of 'insider' jargon and concepts, but clearly presents the necessary information. I think of this as 'distilling down, not dumbing down'. I think there is a particular problem for those working in bureaucracies to 'distil down' their bureaucratic language, not least because (in theory at least!), it is English – and not just when communicating with Aboriginal people or ethnic minorities either.

This is because issues of cross-cultural communication do not just arise in contexts where there are obvious language or other such markers of cultural difference. Users of non-standard English, people without the same educational background of the presenter, or even those from within a different milieu within so-called 'mainstream' society, may be seriously disadvantaged when having to deal with complex oral or written presentations, or forms that they have to fill in.

Preparation – being serious about consultations

Lastly, for consultations to be substantive in the sense that I've been outlining here, they have to be taken seriously within organizational culture. For example, it is not appropriate, in my view, for junior and inexperienced staff to be sent out to conduct consultations.

Those who consult should know their stuff thoroughly, and be fully prepared to undertake the consultations as a serious aspect of organizational business. Perhaps those consulting on important issues should even go through training which include role plays, hypotheticals, and so forth so that they can properly communicate what Aboriginal people often refer to as both the 'outside' story (the simplified, publicly available account), and the 'inside story' (what lies underneath, such as the 'cultural logic' I referred to earlier).

Finally ...

My 'take home message' is this, in summary: Substantive Equality as a policy goal must draw from substantive consultation principles and methodologies, built into organizational cultures as part of their core business.