

GIVING PEOPLE A VOICE

DELIBERATIVE RESEARCH

Engaging citizens through deliberative research

By Viki Cooke.

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Governments are piloting a new type of deliberative research to give citizens a greater say and more involvement in the policy-making process.

It's routine for policy-makers to carry out formal, written consultations when formulating policy, but these attract a low response from the general public, so there has been a move to try to find methods of involving more people.

With deliberative research, researchers recruit citizens for forums on particular subjects, manage and facilitate the process, and analyse what comes out of it. But whilst with traditional research, the researcher designs and manages the interaction, with the deliberative approach, the researcher is just another participant and there is an expectation that through this process, participants will become more informed and engaged with the subject matter than they naturally would be.

The policy-maker also has the opportunity to understand what the key issues are for citizens, and to develop their policies accordingly.

There is a growing body of evidence to illustrate how these approaches have helped to inform and shape policy, design improved delivery models and reconfigure services. The rapid growth of this way of working is testimony to the impact and value provided. Decision-makers are often sceptical, at the outset, about the ability of a group of lay people to consider complex information, manage challenging tradeoffs and arrive at well-articulated, achievable

recommendations. Participation or observation of deliberative methods always challenges this scepticism. Participants demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to work on challenging questions and to determinedly develop thoughtful proposals and then to demand a considered response.

Deliberative research is possible because of a range of changes in society. For instance, there has been a great deal written about 'loss of trust' – with government, with business, with the media and with 'authority'. But this misinterprets what is really happening. People don't trust less, they trust differently.

There has been a fundamental shift from a deferential society – where citizens and consumers were happy to 'defer' to the wisdom and experience of professionals and experts – to a referential society where individuals are more likely to 'refer' to someone they know, or feel they know, to give them information and opinions. And within all walks of life there are individuals who have disproportionate impact because they are great networkers, good communicators, savvy and informed individuals and compelling persuaders. We call them social influencers. These individuals are highly regarded and trusted by their peers.

Up-load society

The growth of digital communications allows everyone to be well informed, researching topics of personal interest or importance, garnering information and points of view. The rapid

development of social networking allows us to feel a direct and personal connection with thousands of individuals that we don't actually know but can see how we are linked to through trusted friends and peers.

We can easily form networks of interest – for example around a shared medical condition – that enable us as individuals to share information, experience and ideas. We can become informed or 'expert' citizens and consumers, 'up-loading' perspectives, enabling us to challenge professionals, questioning their knowledge and wisdom.

The rapid acclimatisation to open-source thinking allows us to develop and refine arguments – experience of tools such as Wikipedia show us how ideas can evolve and be enhanced through sharing. And this changes how we as individuals behave and think. We become comfortable with allowing our own personal viewpoints to be shaped and influenced by others, openly sharing information, experiences and stories to arrive at well-articulated, personally relevant and grounded beliefs.

Growing self-confidence

Grass roots activism is growing and is demonstrably effective. This might be physical, for example there have been very effective grass roots campaigns in local communities about proposed developments, or it might be digital. A recent online petition on the Downing Street website that attracted more than 1.8 million signatures is credited with helping to stop government plans for road charging.

And in this area, success breeds success. As people can see the impact of taking direct action, so they become encouraged and more confident and will start being activists in other areas of their lives.

It is perhaps fitting that one of the tributes to the life of Anita Roddick is the establishment of the new movement 'I am an activist' – www.iamanactivist.org.

These and many other factors result in citizens and consumers who are more assertive and self-confident, who are not happy to be treated as passive

recipients of information and advice, who are starting to push back at the notion of being a 'respondent' in someone else's research programme.

What are the implications for the world of market and social research? How can we as a profession harness this new assertiveness to help create better information, understanding and collaboration? What is the new face of our industry?

Participants not respondents

Fundamental to the success of these newer approaches is a different relationship between the commissioning organisation, the practitioners and the participants. This relationship is built on a different 'contract' that embraces a number of key principles:

Time: Participants need sufficient time to understand information, hear different perspectives and deliberate to achieve quality outcomes.

Transparency: One of the core tenets of this way of working is transparency. It is on this foundation that trust in the approaches can be built.

Information: Deliberative methods require the dissemination, in an accessible way, of complex information and different perspectives. It is through understanding and deliberation that citizens can arrive at high-quality recommendations.

Mutual respect: These methods require a great deal of mutual trust and respect between all parties.

Follow through: Once the recommendations have been made by participants it is essential that the commissioning body responds explaining what they have taken forward and what they haven't, and why.

When would you use these approaches? At any point in the process from policy formation to refining and improving aspects of service delivery. The key to success is being transparent about what is being consulted on and what's already decided upon.

Who you involve, the precise method that you use, the way you construct the agenda and exercises will vary considerably, but the core principles hold good

across the journey from conceptualisation to delivery improvement.

It is also important that people are engaged at a stage where there is still room for significant contribution and before minds have become too firmly set.

Consumers to citizens

One of the key benefits of deliberative methods is their ability to move people from contributing as a consumer to participating as a citizen. Frequently events are structured to involve a wide cross-section of society, working together as equals. This has the significant benefit of enabling participants to move from 'I' to 'we' – engaging in a mature discussion about the conflicting demands of different citizens and communities, working through tradeoffs to arrive at just and appropriate recommendations.

This doesn't mean that we are not interested in their views and experiences as consumers. Rather we ask them to share these with people from very different backgrounds who have very different views and experiences and then consider how to incorporate that breadth.

There is an evolving range of approaches, from small, very intensive approaches such as 'citizens' juries' through to large-scale 'citizens' summits' where thousands of citizens meet (physically and/or via satellite connections) for a day or more. And then there are a number of digital approaches that simulate many of the features of personal deliberative and collaborative methods. The first citizens' summit in the UK was conducted by the Department of Health in 2005 – Your Health, Your Care, Your Say – and this involved a thousand citizens helping to shape health and social care policy. Independent evaluation demonstrated the impact that this programme had on policy, policymakers, politicians and, crucially, participants.

Public sector only?

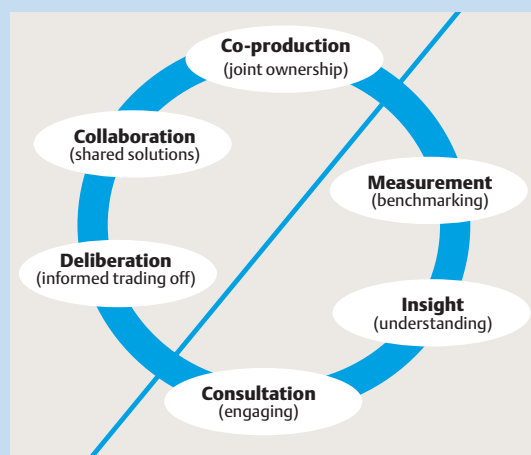
No. Whilst a great deal of the innovation and experimentation has been driven through the public sector, this is now evolving rapidly into the corporate

and brand world. A great example of this was the Prince of Wales' May Day Business Summit on Climate Change. This involved more than a thousand business leaders in a day of deliberations and commitments for businesses to tackle climate change.

This whole way of working is evolving fast. It is invigorating and exciting and there is a real belief amongst practitioners and commissioners that this is going to be a profound part of our democratic revival. And there is plenty of room for further innovation. We are proud that we have just conducted the first Second Life deliberation – this will be a cornerstone of our drive to develop better quality digital deliberative approaches enabling us to engage effectively and affordably with hundreds of thousands of people. •

Viki Cooke is joint chief executive of Opinion Leader.

THE WHEEL OF ENGAGEMENT



The diagram demonstrates what we often describe as a wheel of engagement. It incorporates qualitative and quantitative research methods but extends the toolbox to include deliberative, collaborative and co-production approaches to explain some of the key differences and illustrate how these approaches are effective for public service providers.

There is a current debate about whether these newer methods are in fact 'research' at all or whether they are better described using the language of consultation/engagement/participation. This is a valid debate, and one that will continue.

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