

Bring Them Along

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Change is coming to your community whether you like it or not. The only constant in life is change. Many local leaders are desperately trying to prepare their communities for the future. They are creating plans that anticipate what is coming, and address strategies to prosper from it. That is why I often write about how much things are going to change, as well as how to prepare.

Elected and administrative leaders are developing strategic, economic, recreational, social, tourism, or business plans that will guide their decisions over the next several years. Good plans are not just filled with dreamy vision statements and endless objectives, but action-oriented documents that outline who is responsible for those actions and how to measure results. They should also outline a clear and valuable public communications strategy. Yet that is exactly what most are missing, and that is why those plans fail.

We tend to assume everyone else knows what we know. We forget others are not aware of all the bits of information and data, thought processes, and analysis that led us to our decisions and conclusions. But the public doesn't see what it means to them, how they fit into the picture, or why anything must change at all. That is usually when resistance arises, and the plan falls apart. If you want to succeed, you have to bring the public along with you through a meaningful communications strategy.

The public isn't usually privy to all the information and analysis you possess, but most communications strategies don't address that issue. They often focus on town halls and "sticky note exercises" that gather opinions from people who don't have the information required. Simply gathering public opinions about issues is tough enough. Remember, it was public consultations that led to naming a state-of-the-art research vessel *Boaty McBoatface*.

Complex issues that require creative solutions require research, analysis, and most importantly, an investment of time the public often doesn't have available. That means you need to engage the public in a more efficient and meaningful way by telling them the story of what you are doing, so they understand why you are doing it and what it means to them. Those types of communications strategy recognize that education is at least as important as gathering opinions.

Without educating them about the problem, its challenges and opportunities, and the solutions, the public won't understand why something is being proposed. The story process educates and informs the public, and gets you closer to getting support and buy-in for the plan. When we are impatient, we tend to tell our kids to do something without explaining why it needs to be done. That is when we get resistance.

The public should never be treated like a child, yet so many public consultation strategies treat them as such, because they are nothing more than fruitless opinion-gathering exercises. Have you ever asked your kids what they want to eat, and what they ask for isn't available or healthy? You know what range of options are available, so a smart strategy would be to educate them before you get their opinions. It is the foundation of a valuable communications strategy.

Crafting that strategy isn't difficult. The challenge is in the time it takes. We tend to want to act immediately when we know the way to go, but bringing the public along with a course or strategy takes time, patience, and leadership. Leaders that get too far out in front of the crowd tend to get mistaken for the enemy and shot. Bringing the public along with you raises the chance of success.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.