IAP2 AUSRALASIA

COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT LEADERS RETREAT 2023

SUMMARY REPORT

iap² international association for public participation

Introduction

On 31 May 2023, senior engagement leaders from across Australia and New Zealand met at Uluru to explore the themes of connection, collaboration, inclusivity, and cultural understanding. The three-day retreat enabled delegates to participate in a range of structured and unstructured conversations and be given the time and space to explore the issues that matter most.

An objective of the retreat was to create a series of position statements on important issues. While we did not quite get to finalising agreed statements, we discussed what is most important for our industry and where we should focus our efforts. This document contains a summary of some key discussions.

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First Nations Engagement

Sarah Wilcox of Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and Mike Butler of Urboriginal led a conversation about First Nations Engagement. They shared stories and observations, and delegates could ask questions and share their experiences. Through the discussion, ten principles were identified when undertaking engagement with First Nations communities:

- **Start well** – At the start of an engagement activity, always share an Acknowledgement, Welcome or Statement of Country. Make it meaningful to people in the room, Country and project.
- **Early engagement** - Approach First Nations communities at the earliest project planning stage.
- **Recognise diversity** - Seek out diversity within the First Nations communities. Meet with groups individually.
- **Be mindful of language** – Use respectful and inclusive language. This includes using English terms that may be culturally insensitive for some.
- **Cultural load** – Be aware of the cultural load on First Nation team members. They carry more community expectations than others.
- **Appropriate tools** - Select your techniques wisely, use the telephone, host small meetings, and carefully consider locations.
- **Relevance** – Not all engagement will be relevant to all First Nations groups. Accept that some individuals or groups may not want to participate.
- **Build relationships** – Approach as an ongoing relationship, not a transactional or project-by-project approach.
- **Time** – Recognise that First Nations engagement takes time and build this into your program.
- **Openness** – Create an openness and opportunity to share in the engagement. This may include things that are not directly related to your topic or project.

Engaging Diverse Communities

Sandra Jerkovic and Matt Gordon of Capire facilitated a workshop focusing on diversity and intersectionality. Delegates worked together to identify strategies for engaging with diverse communities and how to ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Delegates identified the following priority strategies:

- Understand communities
  - Use case studies to educate practitioners on the impact and outcomes of engaging with diverse communities.
  - Create a set of diverse community personas that engagement practitioners can use in their engagement planning.
- Create awareness
  - Use storytelling to create awareness of community engagement's importance.
  - A regular Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) update to educate practitioners on recent approaches and projects.
- Diverse practitioners
  - Create a practitioner workforce that reflects the communities we work with through proactive recruitment, training and mentoring.
- Value time
  - Increase recognition of community expertise by using models of engagement that remunerate people for their time.
- Do not make assumptions
  - Always ask the community how they would like to participate, 'What does good look like?' 'what does bad look like?'
- Keep it simple and respectful

Other Themes

Delegates had an opportunity to discuss other themes and share their experiences and ideas on how the industry could respond. A summary is provided below.

Community Organising and Advocacy

Delegates discussed that engagement is not happening at the start of the process, and some community organising activities need to be recognised as engagement, for example, one-to-one meetings. It was also highlighted that not all engagement methods work for all communities. Delegates also discussed that quite often, there is a lack of prior relationships in the community, so they are 'starting from scratch' every time.

Delegates agreed we should advocate for engagement at the earliest possible stages of project planning. They also discussed opportunities to 'demystify' community activists' tools, which are very similar to engagement. They also discussed allocating funding to do research on pathways to engage different advocacy groups. Using the IAP2 member network to learn from each other and make connections with community representatives was also a key opportunity, along with creating strategic partnerships with other peak bodies.

Inclusive Governance

Delegates discussed that there is a 'mystery' associated with governance, that people do not feel empowered to engage, and that it is difficult to understand. A challenge for the government is knowing when to engage and when not to; they are often engaging too late. It was also discussed that the people at the forefront of governance do not investigate their own bias and privilege.

The delegates identified a range of opportunities to respond to these challenges. Regarding communication materials, they should be in plain language, at most two pages with infographics, should be available in places other than websites and should be translated into key community languages. They also felt that the government should partner with other industry bodies to co-develop engagement materials and ask communities what works best for them.

Measuring and Evaluating Community Engagement

Delegates discussed that a skill base for evaluation is still not there in our industry, and there are no recognised metrics or indicators for engagement evaluation. They felt it is difficult to 'make a case for effectiveness, time and saving' if you do not evaluate. There is a perception that is difficult to evaluate, for example, is it about process, outcome and participation?

Opportunities to respond included the education of members and the engagement sector on the IAP2 Quality Assurance Standard for Community and Stakeholder Engagement which includes an evaluation framework that links to the Core Values. There is also an opportunity to adapt from other models, for example a Social Impact Assessment evaluation framework. The industry also needs to build capability and literacy around the importance of evaluation.

Technology and Accessibility

Delegates discussed that online engagement was sometimes considered an inexpensive option to engage the community and did not consider the costs associated with making the technology accessible or the time associated with analysing the actual participation. They felt that technology was 'moving too fast' and online literacy was not keeping up.

Regarding opportunities to respond to the challenges, the safety of participants is of the utmost importance. Delegates also discussed the importance of building the community's capability and choosing the right tools for the community and engagement. There is an opportunity to create an engagement guide for professionals that discusses online accessibility.

Big Take Homes

The big 'take homes' of the IAP2A Leaders Retreat included:

- Practitioners need more training in diversity, inclusion, and engagement. This includes how to design and deliver the engagement, but also communicating its value and impact.
- Start engagement planning by going to the community and asking how they would like to participate. Never make assumptions about the preferences of different groups and cohorts.
- Seek out diversity within diversity. Do not treat groups as homogenous.
- Build community capability to understand the benefits of engagement and build their confidence to actively participate by providing training and support.
- Standards for engagement need to lift. There's too much 'tick the box' engagement and insufficient time or resources for quality engagement.
- Engaging diverse communities should focus on long-term relationships, and then project-based engagement can be delivered in 'bite-size pieces'.

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