

# The communication spectrum

**Martin Butcher PhD - Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria**

This article describes the incremental action learning process that has resulted in a conceptual communication tool or model referred to here as the Communication Spectrum. The process occurred through seeking to explain and make sense of real life situations when working within a participatory development paradigm. The model described in this article results from reflecting on my own work as well as helping other project and program managers become more proficient in engaging the community in decision making.

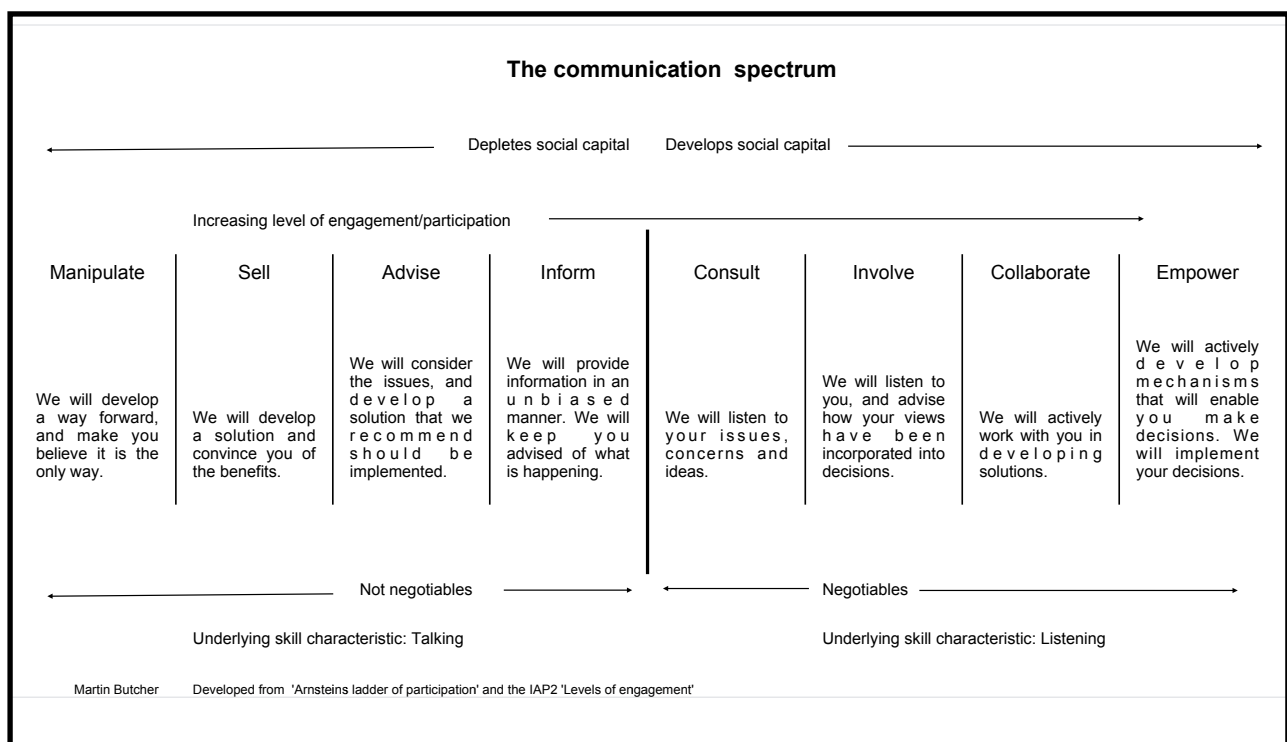


Fig 1 The Communication Spectrum

This spectrum defines commonly used communication terms within a community engagement context (Fig 1). The use of these definitions is that it aids clarity for those

involved in project or program development when they are seeking to engage others in their project. Clearly defining the parameters of a project (the negotiables and non-negotiables) and the type of communication needed provides the basis for meaningful engagement.

The starting point in the development of this communication spectrum was two well known and useful pieces of work.

1) Sherry Arnstein - A ladder of participation (1969) (Fig 2)

2) Des Connor - IAP2 spectrum of engagement (2005, first published 1973) (Fig 3)

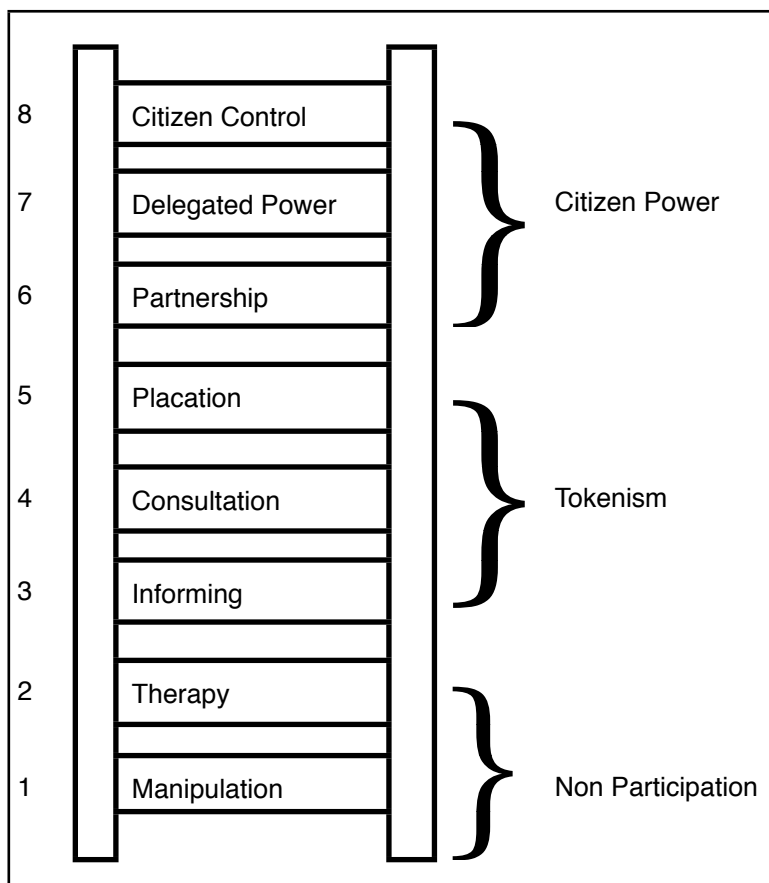


Fig 2 Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

Both these pieces of work have been a part of the urban planning and engineering lexicon since their respective publications. What I describe in this article as the communication spectrum is an additional tool developed over time, through an ongoing process of working within a participatory development framework.


Increasing level of public impact 				
Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Objective	Objective	Objective	Objective	Objective
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public and private concerns are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision making in the hands of the public
Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public	Promise to the public
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge your concerns, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	To place final decision making in the hands of the public

Fig 3 The IAP2 'Spectrum of Engagement'

The idea that appropriately identifying and engaging effected stakeholders in project and program development leads to superior outcomes is extensively supported in the literature (Butcher 2008). Used in conjunction with other stakeholder analysis tools, these tools can help a project or program manager determine the optimum manner to engage an identified stakeholder.

## **Context**

My involvement with these tools has been in three arenas.

- 1) Working in community development focussed positions, such as Community Renewal programs on Australian public housing estates.
- 2) As a consultant assisting other project managers develop engagement plans for their projects.
- 3) Developing courses at the Department of Sustainability and Environment (Victoria) for project managers to explore the concepts of community engagement.

It has been a process of continually looking for ways to explain both these tools and relate it to practical applications that the idea of a communication spectrum has emerged. In particular the need to explain the concepts behind the tools has been to:

- 1) Advise or train project and program developers of community engagement theory and practice.
- 2) Inform and assist myself in the practicalities of community engagement.

Each of these situations has been when practicing as a development professional working within an inclusive values framework.

## **The first modification**

The wording and phraseology of both the Ladder of Participation and the Spectrum of Engagement tools describe the relationship between a government body or other implementing agency and 'the public'. My first modification to these tools derived from

experience working within the community sector. In this context I often worked in situations where power differences were not necessarily between agency and public, but simply between different sectors of the community.

My first use of the ladder of participation was to help me understand and give structure to

A public housing authority decided to let residents determine how to spend a sum of money allocated to upgrading the houses. The 'committee' decided that all houses should have a ceiling fan and a security screen door. The tenants on this committee effectively became unpaid public servants, and other tenants no more empowered than it the decision had been made by public servants.

the work I was doing in public housing estates. It was in this environment that I started to realise that power can be exercised in many ways, and that formal power, such as being an elected official or enforcement official is only one way in which power exists. This understanding provoked my first

change to these tools which was in the wording of 'empowerment' in the IAP2 spectrum. In my work I saw many situations where a formal agency would devolve power to another group (such as a community group), but which in turn simply lead to that group acting dictatorially. In my mind it was too easy to use the word 'empowerment' to cover up abdication of responsibility without being serious about empowering others in the broader sense. I felt that empowerment would be better defined as the powerful providing a framework for others to make decisions. This would place a greater onus on the agency with power to ensure that those individuals without power had a say in the decision.

Creating an additional level of bureaucracy such as a management committee is not adequate. My second change developed from trying to understand more clearly the difference between 'consult' and 'involve' on the IAP2 spectrum and relating these definitions to the ideal of a participatory development paradigm.

#### Empowerment

We will actively develop mechanisms that will enable you make decisions. We will implement your decisions.

## The second modification

These modifications to the wording of the spectrum occurred through taking a pro-active approach to enabling participatory development. On the one hand I could see that the word 'consult' is used extensively in land planning legislation, with a meaning that a proposal is made by those with the power, and then enabling others have an opportunity to object or comment on the proposal. On the other hand, the very notion of a spectrum of engagement seemed to suggest a different way of doing business. If we are to move from a Design Announce Defend (DAD) development paradigm towards a Participatory Involvement Process (PIP), then surely the word 'consult' should have a meaning more conducive to the latter, rather than describing a situation that occurs within the frame of the former. Thus while it is possible to interpret the IAP2 description as a form of participatory development, the phrase 'consult' with that description is more often associated with the more traditional model. Rewording the definition of consult with the emphasis on the listening part of the IAP2 definition places greater distance between 'consult' and 'inform'. At this same time, when referring to the IAP2 spectrum in training, participants would often find it difficult to understand the concept of 'involve', especially between 'involve' and 'collaborate'. There did though seem to be a possible definition of 'involve' that could sit between 'consult' and 'collaborate' based on the idea of creating relationships. There is a strong nexus between participatory development as a development approach, and creating relationships. There are many occasions where stakeholder groups might be legitimately 'consulted', and who never hear from the questioner again. Equally, not all stakeholders want to be engaged in every aspect of the decision making but there needs to be an ongoing relationship maintained between those with power and those without. Thus it might be desirable to actively

### Consult

We will listen to your issues, concerns and ideas.

### Involve

We will listen to you, and advise how your views have been incorporated (or not) into decisions.

reconnect with those particular stakeholders to inform them how their input was used (or not). This is different to the idea of active or empathetic listening in which the listener confirms they have heard properly, and more about enabling a longer term relationship develop between those with the power and those without on a topic that is of common interest.

Thus this rewording of the definitions is to describe the difference in the value of the longer term relationship between those who one consults, as opposed to those whom one involves. In both instances there is no guarantee about how or if the information provided will be used in the decision. Power is still restricted to those stakeholders who are collaborators, but a purposeful ongoing relationship is maintained with those 'involved' by actively re-engaging with that group to explain how their views were incorporated (or not) into the decision made.

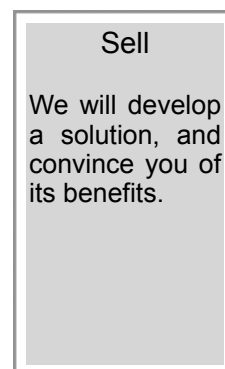
### **Negotiables and Non-Negotiables**

A key part of successful community engagement planning is for project and program managers to be clear about their project parameters. A useful tool is to record the elements of the project that are 'not-negotiable' and those that are 'negotiable'. These elements might change during the projects life, but at any given point there will be elements in each category. Thus a local politician might have been elected with a clear and expressed mandate to 'upgrade the main street'. Upgrading the main street might then become a non-negotiable, but whether it becomes a pedestrian mall or have restricted parking or trees or sculptures are all negotiable. It is thus not possible to 'consult' around those aspects of the project that are 'not-negotiable', only the 'negotiable' areas of a project or program. Thus a useful addition to the spectrum was that the non-

negotiables sat under inform, and the negotiables under the right hand part from 'consult' to 'empower'.

### **An extended spectrum**

It was from this viewpoint that the spectrum begun to look a bit uneven. and that there was scope to add more to the left-hand side. After all, there might be four variations to engage people around what is 'negotiable' in a project or program, but why only one way in which to express the 'non-negotiables'? From a free interpretation/adaptation of Arnsteins work, what was missing sat in those areas of tokenism and non-participation. At



the same time there are the perfectly legal and legitimate skills of advising and selling. Thus adding these two areas to the left hand side helped balance the equation a little, leaving 'manipulation' at the end. An alternative to 'manipulation' can be 'dictate', (we will apply legal sanctions to enforce a decision or behaviour) which those in enforcement roles find useful. See Fig 1.

### **Listening and Talking**

Our current western culture places considerable emphasis on persuading people to act differently. This might be for any reason, ranging from buying lotto tickets, supporting a particular sporting club or wearing seat belts. The messages we receive are often contradictory, but the emphasis is on persuading people to act differently or in a particular way. There are many different persuasion techniques ranging from giving better PowerPoint presentations to buying TV advertising or attending public speaking courses. A common characteristic that sits under what is now the left hand side of the spectrum is the capacity to talk. This is in contrast to the right hand side of the spectrum which requires 'listening' in some form or other. Even if all that the one with the power is willing to do is



‘consult’, the promise is still ‘we will listen to your ideas, issues and concerns’. A useful result of this modification is that it both legitimises the idea of ‘selling’ as an engagement process, while at the same time requires project managers to be clearer about their actions and rhetoric. In other words, if your mind is made up and you just want people to accept it, don’t start talking about ‘consultation’, talk about ‘selling’ and act appropriately.

This does of course open up the question of the benefits of ‘community engagement’ as a part of policy and program development. For if it is perfectly legitimate to ‘sell’ or even ‘dictate’ your particular policy or program, why not keep on as normal? Sometimes it is possible to explore the idea of social capital, the meaning of engagement, and how carrying out the activities on the right have a greater capacity to build trust, confidence and attributes loosely defined as ‘social capital’, than through the activities on the left. Often though those social outcomes are not part of a project managers brief. In these instances the spectrum is useful to explore either better project outcomes, how their work meets Government policies regarding engagement, or just simply, risk. It is always possible for a project or program manager to work everything out in the privacy of their own computer, and then run an engagement process asking for input on how people would like to be told about it. This tool can’t help in that situation, but it can be used to encourage project managers to both engage earlier, and with more confidence.

## **Conclusion**

The communication spectrum has evolved over a period of time and reflects my own perception of participatory development. In this respect it reflects an often held view that the aim of community engagement and participatory development is a dialogue between stakeholders. It also reflects the reality that some stakeholders hold more power than others, and is thus useful for understanding this relationship.

## Reflections

As with any model, this communication spectrum is not reality; just an approximation. I can see areas where the logic doesn't stand up. However I have now used it with many different clients - especially project managers in the public service- and found it a really useful tool. It helps project managers see the difference between 'getting their message across' and more inclusive engagement practice. It also provides a concrete differential between how to handle the negotiables and non-negotiables of a project when working with particular stakeholders or at a particular point of a project. More than anything it helps clarify formal communication with others about a specific project or program.

Arnstein, S 1969, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', Journal of the American Planning Association, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 216-24.

Butcher, M 2008, 'Participatory Development;Methods, Skills and Processes' PhD thesis  
[www.martinbutcher.com](http://www.martinbutcher.com)

Connor,D, 2005 Connor Development Services Ltd. Constructive Citizen Participation: A Resource Book 8th edition.

IAP2 [www.iap2.org/](http://www.iap2.org/)

Copyright © Martin Butcher 2009. May be copied provided it is not included in material sold at a profit, and this and the following notice are shown.

This document may be cited as follows:

Butcher, M. (2009) *Communication Spectrum*. URL <http://www.martinbutcher.com/portfolio/articles>