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PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Strategic questioning in action

Introduction

In my work as a local government representative, I have been dismissed publicly as a middle class trendy by some who disagree vehemently with the notion of increased community consultation and participation in the decision making process. Is the new interest in community consultation an example of trendiness? Is government serious about community consultation at a local and regional level or do elected representatives see themselves as the only real decision makers?

With my fellow Community Independent councillors, I have introduced a number of innovative decision making processes to Lismore City Council. These include proposals for policy juries, mediation prior to planning decisions, street corner meetings, public question time during council meetings and recording of councillors' votes.

I am currently assessing the effectiveness of the many consultative models employed both locally and beyond. This article presents a Strategic Questioning exercise which involved fellow councillors, staff and community members. The conclusions validate the significance of Strategic Questioning in uncovering new ideas and allowing for change in both the interviewer and interviewee. I believe that non-dualism, interdependence and mindfulness can teach us much about effective listening, learning and living in our communities.

Policy juries

Policy juries (Carson 1994; Crosby 1990; Greenwald 1991) involve the random selection of citizens to create a microcosm of the larger community. This group is called a 'jury' because it is exposed to 'evidence' about an issue so that it can make an informed decision.

Within months of my election to Lismore City Council in 1991 I was greeted with a newspaper headline that stopped me in my tracks. Starry-eyed with the possibilities of being in office, intent on introducing consultative models which had been the basis of my election platform (and that of my fellow Community Independents) I was confronted with the headlines: Jury decision: "The height of stupidity" (*The Northern Star*, 9 Nov 1991). The article outlined the concept of policy juries which I had introduced to Council at its previous meeting. I had been pleased to gain the support of a majority of councillors to use this consultative model to test the community's reaction to a proposed flood mitigation scheme. A local union identity:

slammed the proposal, saying it was another example of 'trendy middle-class wacky thinking' being imposed on a problem that needed a real solution.

"The danger in the proposal is that people will start arguing about the process and its result, instead of concentrating on the real needs of real people in this community," he said.

"Some people appear to want to leave Lismore more to the ravages of floods to

fulfil some esoteric philosophical agendas of their own."

The policy jury decision was eventually reversed by Council and repeated attempts to conduct a trial of policy juries failed. Other suggested methods, including a survey and a referendum were also rejected by the majority of councillors. Years later the flood levee scheme is still being hotly debated and sectors of the community are still outraged by what they perceive as a lack of input into the decision making process.

Three years after the above mentioned article, and in an attempt to explore some of the differing perspectives on community consultation, I embarked on an exercise in Strategic Questioning which I hoped would give me some insight into the thinking of my fellow councillors, senior Council staff and my vocal opponents in the community. The results held a number of surprises for me as well as confirming many of my previously held beliefs.

Strategic questioning

Strategic questioning, as outlined by American author, Fran Peavey, is said to be rich with possibilities: it can change entire organisations and the listener as well as the person being questioned. It can create new options and is empowering. The strategic questioning exercise which follows was conducted in Lismore in December 1994. I tested Peavey's claims by interviewing eighteen key people involved with Lismore City Council.

The results confirmed the effectiveness of some of Peavey's claims.

Strategic questioning is seen as an important adjunct to what Peavey calls 'heart politics' or introducing the heart into politics. Heart politics to many of us is an oxymoron, like 'military intelligence' or 'fighting for peace'. However Peavey sees heart politics as the politics of connection rather than of conflict and domination (Peavey, 1994, p12). So often there is a huge divide between our espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris & Schön cited by Dick & Dalmau, 1990, p19) and I have experienced no finer example of this chasm than in my attempts to stay within the philosophy of heart politics whilst working within an adversarial system.

Peavey claims that there are long-lever and short-lever questions. Questions which require a 'yes' or 'no' response are short-lever questions e.g. 'do you beat your husband?'. Those that require a descriptive, thoughtful answer are long-lever e.g. 'can you describe your relationship with your husband?'. Communications theory would describe these long-lever questions as open-ended questions (Minichiello et al 1990, p90).

Peavey's Strategic Questioning also relies on a re-positioning by the questioner. This re-positioning avoids speaking at the person being questioned and instead has the questioner alongside the person being questioned in a position which allows for a mutually found answer or solution. The questioner needs to set aside her/his belief in knowing the correct answer in order to facilitate this process.

Peavey makes the following observations:

- Questioning is a basic tool of rebellion. It can change your life, institutions and entire cultures. Asking a question that leads to a strategy for action is a powerful contribution to resolving any problem.
- Strategic questioning is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference; involves a special type of question and a special type of listening; is a process that may change the listener as well as the person being questioned; creates options and digs deeper; avoids 'why', 'yes' or 'no' answers; is empowering and asks the unaskable questions.

FIRST AND SECOND LEVEL QUESTIONS

Peavey divides questions into various lev-

els. The first level involves the description of the issue or the problem.

Examples of first level questions are:

Focus questions:

How does this affect you?

Observation questions:

What have you read about this?

Analysis questions:

What do you think about this?

Feeling questions:

How do you feel about the situation?

The second level digs deeper by asking the strategic questions. Examples of second level questions are:

Visioning questions:

How would you like it to be?

Change questions:

How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it?

Considering all the alternatives:

What are all the ways you can think of that would accomplish these changes?

Consider the consequences:

What would be the effect of ...?

Consider the obstacles:

What prevents you from ?

Personal inventory and support questions:

How can I support you? or What aspects of the situation interest you the most?

Personal action questions:

How can you get others together to work on this?

Peavey believes that the questioner needs to let the ideas emerge from and look for the 'change view' of the people affected. The questioner also needs to create a neutral, common ground, to create respect and to listen to people's pain.

Strategic questioning: The Lismore case study

Using Peavey's methodology, I mustered all my courage to attempt a strategic questioning exercise involving many people with whom I had been in conflict. In order to determine whether or not we all agreed at least on what the term community consultation meant I embarked on the following process. In the process I was hopeful that new ideas would emerge.

I sent a request for an interview to eleven councillors, five executive members of council's staff, two media representatives who regularly attended council meetings and three community members who had vocally opposed my view on community consultation.

I anxiously rang them once I had sent the request to see if they would support

me in this project. I was feeling very uncomfortable because there had been open hostility with some of them on this issue on a number of occasions. To my surprise and delight eighteen of the twenty one people agreed. They each set aside half an hour in their busy schedules and co-operated in the project. Two councillors remained very cautious, the rest were remarkably helpful and open with their responses. I asked the same set of questions of each. The questions are summarised in the following section.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Focus question: I asked them to focus firstly on personal decision making and about how they made decisions which affected their family or neighbours.

Feeling question: If you think about involving others in consultation, in areas where you would be reluctant to share the decision making, what reactions do you have to this?

Analysis question: What does the phrase 'community consultation' mean to you?

Feeling question: How do you feel about community consultation? What emotions or feelings, if any, does the notion create, either positive or negative?

Focus question: In what ways do you believe that you, as a councillor or staff member, currently allow the public to participate in your decision making?

Visioning question: What would be your ideal of public participation in decision making? What would it mean to the average resident? What would it look like? How would it be for them, and you?

Change question: In what ways could you, in your current position, share your influence with others in the community, ways you are not doing now?

Personal action question: Is there a single first step you could take to help the community have a greater share of influence?

Analysis question: Do you think of yourself as a community leader?

Focus question: What are the qualities of good leadership?

Interviewees were given a number of assurances. Their taped interview would remain confidential. The transcribed interviews were returned to them for change. The interviewees were able to delete anything they wished they had not said or to add anything more which may have occurred to them afterwards. I saw this as very important. I was hoping that some of the questions would prompt some further analysis.

With the wisdom of hindsight I wish I had been braver with my questions, by asking more second level questions. The willingness of interviewees made it clear to me that I could have been bolder and more mutually exploratory. I underestimated the ability of some of my interviewees to head off on this adventure although it is also true that I over-estimated the preparedness of others.

MY VALUES AND BELIEFS

Interviewees know me as a councillor and were no doubt curious and possibly dubious about this new role as interviewer and student. Though they were given an assurance that their interviews would be treated as confidential and conclusions would be drawn in a general way without any mention of names, a few remained sceptical. Most accepted my assurance. Participants displayed a surprising level of trust.

In conducting this research I was mindful of my own personal beliefs and values which might inevitably influence my findings. Interviewees knew of my interest in community consultation and my resistance to adversarial approaches to decision making.

I wanted to test Peavey's theory of strategic questioning, that by suspending our belief in knowing the answer, we can explore other possibilities with those with whom we might otherwise disagree. It has always interested me that councillors who are not on 'my side' of the chamber will disagree vehemently with me over something they would otherwise tolerate if suggested by 'their side' or by Council staff.

There were a couple of limitations imposed. I believed that I needed to ask everyone the same set of questions. I would have preferred to ask one very open-ended question then to have the freedom to allow us (the interviewee and I) to explore the subject together. I believe I made the right choice to be more formal because of the awkward nature of some relationships.

Having inevitably set my own agenda through the process of formulating the questions, I attempted to suspend my own position on the subject of community consultation. I encouraged the interviewees in their responses. I did not disagree or question them except for clarification. Strategic questioning does indeed require "a special type of listening" (Peavey, 1994, p87).

Some preliminary findings

The data which emerged from these eighteen interviews were rich with information about the participants' thought processes, world views and, in some cases, creative and critical thinking. I have selected a few themes only for this article.

DUALISM

The issue of representative versus participatory democracy which I raised earlier emerged as a clear division between participants. The focus, like much of our Council debate, is on a notion of dualism which appears to be in contradiction to reality. 'Representative versus participatory', 'right or wrong', 'both sides of the argument' - all these phrases exemplify the dualism which is part of our Western scientific tradition and world view.

Some examples of this were:

"I think from hearing both points of view you get to understand the issues better"

"We could have had half-a-dozen people from that side of the community, and half-a-dozen people from the other side of the community"

Only one of the eighteen participants saw the importance of widening this perspective:

"You may only get one view at public access or two views. There's so many more."

Many times, the notion of right and wrong was brought up:

"We have elected you to make our decisions for us and if you make the wrong decisions we are not going to put you there next year."

"Confidence in what you feel is to be right and what you feel is to be wrong is a good start. If you've got any procrastination there you won't show a lead."

REPRESENTATIVES MUST DECIDE

Lobbying was seen as a valid form of consultation: the belief being that if councillors did not perform they would not be re-elected. This may be a sensible method of assessment when considering a single elected state or federal representative. It is difficult to see how the community can make a clear distinction between the decisions of individual councillors and those which are attributed to the entire council. Those who pushed the lobbying option also stressed the need for council to function as a team, to avoid recission motions and to accept the majority decision. Presumably

each marginalised councillor is then penalised or rewarded by the decisions of others.

CONSULTATION CREATES TOO MUCH EMOTION

The community was often dismissed by interviewees as ignorant, apathetic or child-like in nature. The words of one participant, in describing his own relationship with his children, was later mirrored by councillors when discussing the community. "I don't think kids want to be troubled with things... as a parent sometimes you have to assume that it's your responsibility to make the decisions."

"I think that we do have to make the decisions because the community consultation ... creates too much emotion"

"[qualities of a good leader] .. a good guider, a father figure .. a good parent type person"

YOU'VE GOT TO CONSULT IN FAIRLY SIMPLE TERMS

The community was seen as confused and ignorant:

"If you consult with the community, you've got to consult .. in fairly simple terms"

"too many people trying to make a decision on issues that really they are not qualified to make"

"they don't really know, most of them don't understand"

There were occasional flashes of respect for the community's abilities:

"I think people are capable of listening to objective arguments and weighing things up. We tend to create an adversarial situation."

OH WELL WHY BOTHER?

Apathy was seen to be widespread in the community by almost all participants. None raised the possibility that apathy may be merely an unused muscle, that is, the community is not encouraged to participate so it has no expectations or energy to do so. Only a few offered reasons for this apathy, most saw it as a 'given':

"Australians as a group appear to be reasonably apathetic people and are quite happy for things to sail along on the premise that 'they' - the magic 'they' - will look after them"

"Only a small percentage of them are really going to be interested in it ... probably only 10% of people are really in depth interested in what you're talking about"

"Some people don't want to be consulted about anything because they don't care. Literally their lives are so powerless or their lives are so taken up doing what they're doing. I don't think you can force people into it. It would be a nice model if everyone was standing at the acropolis having a bit of a vote. But don't forget the women and the slaves weren't there and the foreigners, they weren't there ... I'd be very wary of anything that ... seduced people into thinking that ... they were part of this decision-making when they weren't"

IF YOU WERE TO CALL A MEETING THEY WON'T TURN UP

Despite this, there was a belief that people were happy to participate as long as the situation was not a formal one.

"You get to hear a lot about what people think and feel about things and you know that people feel strongly and you know that they have very good ideas ... if you were to call a meeting ... they won't turn up" "I am a little dubious about organised forums or organised referendum ... I believe that the issues can get terribly distorted particularly in a formal situation"

WE ALL KNOW THE SHORTCOMINGS OF A PUBLIC MEETING

Public meetings were universally condemned by interviewees. There is a strong belief that public meetings attract only the incensed and the articulate.

"I really hate public meetings because the only people that turn up at public meetings are people that oppose something"

"I personally do not believe that public meetings in many cases are the best consultative tool... pretty much stacked with people with strongly delineated sides of the argument"

Strategic questioning outcomes

Unlike other forms of interview, Peavey argues that strategic questioning has the potential to allow the emergence of new ideas and options, to allow for the unaskable questions to be asked and for the questioning process to change the questioner.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW IDEAS AND OPTIONS

So, was Peavey right? Did new ideas emerge? Were new options created?

It was a surprise to me that policy juries, which I had believed were not acceptable to other councillors, kept popping up in a way which suggests that there is real interest in them, despite their newness and councillors' considerable reservations:

"The idea of policy juries ... appealed to me ... I've never used it and I've never seen it work but the idea of choosing people at random seems to say well that's one way of organising a good cross section" "juries on issues ... but not doing it in a reactive way"

Beyond policy juries some innovative strategies emerged. The random selection concept was taken a step further. The possibility was suggested of having a regular jury which could give feedback to Council:

"a random group of people and use them as a community barometer" or a "community litmus group"

Lismore City Council has a rural contact forum three or four times per annum. Six councillors are rostered to facilitate a forum which is held at different rural locations. Why not extend this, asked one councillor? Or council/staff forums?

"I have toyed with the idea of maybe having some sort of contact time where management might be available as well as councillors ... so that we can get direct feedback ... would be an interesting experience to see what sort of reaction you got from such an offer"

Another councillor liked the idea of councillors, in small groups, researching issues prior to each council meeting:

"[councillors] give them say a bigger area, and turn the situation around from being part-time to full-time and then ... say these are the four items this week that we want a group of three to deal with, you go and see all the parties, it's like a forum ... do a lot more work than rely on the staff, because I have found that system wanting a lot"

Another councillor suggested a public debate as a means of resolving contentious issues:

"we could all sit there in front of you, debate the issue just like you would with Geoffrey Robertson's hypothetical and then after you'd heard us debate all of those things, then you can ask us all questions and at the end we will give you the opportunity to vote"

What about councils playing a role in reducing the growing alienation of our suburbs?

"something that could perhaps catalyse a community into meeting on a regular basis .. in the street, that would be great.. I think Council could really play quite a proactive role in that regard ...some interaction with the other people in the neighbourhood and not really to see them as strangers ...local government here is the appropriate one to actually affect the precincts we live in"

Building on the results of our 2020 Strategic Plan, one interviewee wanted a three-tiered consultative model to consider broad policy issues:

"I liked the idea in the Strategic Plan of setting up this community group that represents a whole broad cross-section ..so that ... all policy issues ... could feed through there. I don't think they would need to get involved in the nitty-grittys, the day-to-days .. but the strategic processes ... that could be taken down to the next level then, where you do have community groups attached at the lower level ... it's the scale of the group. I'm concerned that if you get down to too small a scale, then it becomes so insular that they only think of their immediate backyard"

One councillor suggested a combined council/community newsletter to break down the perception of 'us' and 'them' and another a youth council to "involve youth more".

An idea which emerged from one staff member was mentioned to two councillors after their interviews and shows promise. It is likely to be embraced as a method for resolving a very real and contentious issue for us at the moment. It takes the workshop model an important step further:

"Many issues, particularly those which are potentially divisive should be workshopped ... prior to the workshop councillors (and staff) should provide ... details of their individual fears and concerns about the matter at hand. Information to reinforce any proposal should be provided. Time should then be given to staff to review all matters raised prior to consideration at the workshop ... permits councillors to better utilise their professional staff resource and provide a more interactive approach to managing key issues."

ASKING THE UNANSWERABLE QUESTIONS

Was Peavey right? Were the unaskable questions asked? Some of them were certainly unanswerable.

A few participants commented on

how helpful the exercise had been for them in clarifying their thinking. Most were perplexed by the request to hypothesise when asked what their 'ideal' of public participation would be. Only three of the eighteen participants were able spontaneously to answer the 'visioning' question; six believed that we had the ideal already; the remaining nine found it extremely difficult to answer and this is reflected in their statements:

"you've caught me there, because I haven't given that much thought."

"that's an extraordinarily difficult one .. I mean that's really waving the magic wand, eh?" "I find that very difficult ...going out and consulting ... I find it, just getting one answer to that ... nothing that really hits me in the eye as an ideal .. no .. at this stage"

"Well, I don't know. I don't know that I could even answer it. I don't. I've never really, I've never thought about it."

Peavey believes this to be an excellent outcome. Though questions are initially unanswered, they are left wandering about in our minds for days or weeks and eventually we attend to thinking more creatively about them. This has been my experience at Council. Instead of asking whether something can be done, if I ask 'what would need to change in order for ...?' or a similar question, the results have been quite different. Instead of 'no, it cannot be done', staff have returned weeks later with new ideas for solving a problem. In the strategic questioning exercise, within the context of even our brief half hour together, new ideas did emerge from the interviewees. One is already being acted upon; others may emerge at a later date.

DID THE QUESTIONING CHANGE THE QUESTIONER?

My attitude to my fellow councillors has undergone a marked change. I was able to discern their willingness to embrace ideas which I had imagined had been discarded, for example, policy juries. I also detected a willingness to trial new ideas and I now have a much better appreciation of, and respect for, the reservations of my colleagues.

I have also gained a greater understanding of the great divide which we imagine exists between participatory and representative democracy. It is now a question of degree for me and not an either/or situation.

My relationship with at least two

councillors has been altered by the exchange. I have discerned strengths in them which had been hitherto unnoticed and I believe there has been a softening in their attitude to me. My appreciation and knowledge of all the staff and community members I interviewed has shifted positively.

Listening was a skill which was admired by all who were interviewed: either in me as their interviewer, in themselves as representatives, employees or community advocates, and as an essential quality in their ideal leader. Ultimately, however, listening may not be enough. The bottom line may be the extent to which elected representatives are prepared to share their influence with the community.

Conclusions

Strategic questioning proved to be a significant tool for change in that it allowed new ideas to emerge. It also provided a stimulus for shifting the thinking and feelings of both interviewees and the interviewer. Strategic questioning may provide a model for a consultative process in the wider community with its emphasis on listening and the required preparedness on the part of the questioner to change. It also uncovered the perceived shortcomings of our present consultative methods and the need to improve these before the majority of councillors and council staff will approach consultation with confidence and enthusiasm. ■

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