

# ENGAGEMENT AND CO-CREATION OF THE “BEST POSSIBLE SOLUTION”

By Vince Verlaan

## INTRODUCTION

High quality participation in planning and design is increasingly being demanded by citizens, government agencies, professions, and non-profit groups. Businesses also increasingly value engagement in their initiatives, especially when the issues and possible impacts are contentious.

At HB Lanarc, we favour **early and ongoing** involvement of “diverse voices” to enrich the planning or design process with new knowledge and energy. We see people and their ideas for their “home places” as **assets to work with**, rather than as problems to be resolved. We know that engagement is the best way to work through complex problems and seize opportunities.

Population growth, economic development, livability, health, community vitality and equity, sustainability, climate change, etc., are just some of the cross-cutting issues where **public input** and **productive dialogue** are critical. And since the “answers” to these “wicked problems” are not yet 100% clear to anyone, limited forms of public consultation by experts are simply not acceptable or sufficient anymore (if they ever were).

In this spirit, we engage diverse people by posing “key questions” the project needs input on at every stage. Next steps are always shaped and directed by the answers received.

This commitment to inclusive and genuine engagement is what makes the participation meaningful. People feel they have been heard and that their ideas have helped to co-

create the plan or design; their understanding and support are increased and the product is stronger.

The ultimate goal of effective engagement is **consensus** that the go-forward plan or design is the **best one possible**. This consensus will not fully satisfy everyone, but is thoughtful, creative, and defensible. Working in this way also ensures that community capacity for effective planning and design is increased, an objective we take very seriously.

## **A SPECIAL APPROACH**

Dialogue-based engagement has been extremely effective in numerous projects that we have lead or participated in, and there is an extensive body of literature showing that an engaged citizenry contributes to community health, vitality, quality of life and effective governance.

“Strong Engagement” is a model we have developed and use wherever possible, and one we teach to non-profits, citizens, corporations and governance bodies. Strong Engagement refers to how governance structures and processes can evolve to make **collaborative** and **action-oriented** planning and design into the normal way of doing business.

Strong Engagement accesses and creates **group wisdom** that helps your organization to:

- Define challenges and opportunities properly
- Establish clear priorities for action
- Identify and connect with new resources
- Generate new solutions (and hope)
- Ensure the proper application of expert knowledge
- Make tough choices and solve tough problems
- Build social and community capital

Clear and creative communication to diverse audiences using diverse channels, transparency in planning and action over the life of the initiative, and ongoing engagement of various groups, are key to any “Strong Engagement” initiative.

## **BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT AND CO-CREATION**

- Enriches the planning and design process with more ideas from a broader range of voices, and ensures the questions being asked are the right ones
- Develops clear understanding of local issues, challenges and opportunities by getting the input of local people from a range of perspectives
- Deepens trust in the process and the governance body responsible, and reduces conflict
- Informs the technical work/solutions being developed and makes them more relevant and clear to citizens and stakeholders
- Generates new solutions that no one could have thought of on their own
- Creates support for implementation and ACTION
- Reduces confusion and improves project timing (saves time and money)
- Allows for ongoing learning and experimentation for sustainability
- Builds capacity in society, the community and in institutions