

Citizen-Government Dialoguing — How Maroochy Shire Council Started On The Inside

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Abstract

This presentation explores how an organisation realised that to improve its community engagement practices; it must firstly build its own capacity. With this in mind, Maroochy Shire Council on Queensland's Sunshine Coast developed a public participation program to improve the way it worked with the community. This in turn is leading to improved decision making through effective citizen-government dialoguing.

Maroochy Shire Council based their Public Participation Program on the International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2) best practice framework. As winner of the 2004 IAP2 'Organisation of the Year' Core Values Award, Maroochy is considered an International leader in the field.

The presentation will walk through what Maroochy put in place to develop the knowledge and application skills of their staff in public participation practices. Barriers to capacity building have been identified throughout the implementation of the project and various processes, tools and techniques have been adopted and integrated into the organisation to overcome these barriers.

The result was that the program assisted to change the organisation's approaches and behaviours in regards to public participation. Evaluation of projects also indicates that the community believe they have been listened to, their feedback considered and that the council is making better decisions because they are more informed about issues. This is capacity building at its best where both the organisation and the community are working effectively together to obtain better outcomes for the community.

The Maroochy Public Participation Program (MPPP) is now considered a critical strategy in moving the organisation forward with the Councillors, CEO and General Managers supporting the program at the highest level.

Introduction

[Skit]

Speaker 1: "Nigel, I need you to organise six focus groups this week! We need to say that we've consulted with the community on this project!"

The project report must go to Council in two weeks, that means we have one week to get the focus groups done, so you might want to put all other work on hold while you sort this one out.

Make an appointment to see me at the end of the week to bring me up to speed on your progress.

Oh, and by the way Nig, we don't have any money for consultation, so do the best you can without a budget."

Speaker 2: Sound familiar to you?

Perhaps not to those of you who don't work in local government, however my experience from working in consultancies tells me that you have similar experiences like this with clients. And I know for sure that the community representatives here today will have experienced this last minute, panic from the top situation first hand.

Capacity Building — where to start? Our presentation is going to explore how our organisation realised that to build the capacity of our community; we must firstly build our own capacity.

The plan for the next 20 minutes is to keep the session reasonably informal, please feel free to ask us questions as we go along. Our presentation focuses on the following four key pieces of information:

1. Background on the Maroochy Public Participation Program
2. Maroochy Shire Council – where, who and what are we?
3. Where to start on the inside?
4. The barriers we faced along the way and how we overcame them.

1. Background on the Maroochy Public Participation Program

Our council developed a public participation program to improve the way we worked with the community. This in turn is leading to greater capacity and trust within the community.

Over four years in the making, we based our Public Participation Program on the IAP2's best practice framework. As the winner of multiple awards regionally, nationally and most recently, internationally when we received this year's IAP2 Core Values 'Organisation of the Year' Award, Maroochy is considered a leader in the field.

We developed a sound policy framework consisting of values and principles; we have built a simple, 'do-able' yet profoundly effective process to ensure that the objectives of the Program are achieved. Our comprehensive program consists of the following elements:

- Six-step planning framework
- Policy
- Strategy
- 'How to' manual with toolkit
- Management and staff public participation support groups
- Staff training
- Internet and intranet websites, brochures and a fact sheet.

The result was that our program assisted to change the organisation's approaches and behaviours in regards to public participation. Good public participation practices have become a way of life at the council. It has changed the way we do things. Evaluation of projects also indicates that the community believe they have been listened to, their feedback considered and that the council is making better decisions because they are more informed about issues. This is capacity building at its best where both the organisation and the community are working more effectively together to obtain better outcomes for the community.

The Maroochy Public Participation Program (MPPP) is now considered a critical strategy in moving the organisation forward with the councillors, CEO and general managers supporting the program at the highest level.

2. Maroochy Shire Council — where, who and what are we?

[Start visualisation]

Close your eyes, take a deep breath and picture this...

You are walking along a clean and long beach on a warm summer's morning. You've been on holidays for a month now and you are feeling completely and utterly relaxed. You find a perfect clearing on the beach to spread your beach towel out and you lie down to soak up some sunrays.

As you lie contemplating how amazing you feel, you realise you are in one of the best places in the world. You are lying on a beach at the heart of Queensland's Sunshine Coast. A waiter (this could be male or female depending on your preference!) brings you a pina colada cocktail made from the finest big pineapples.

As you lie back and look out over the deep blue ocean, you reflect on Maroochy's community, which you have come to know. It's made up of many different and diverse communities. As such, there is no one community of interest, nor is there one shared vision for Maroochy (not for long, however, because over the past year, we have been undertaking the biggest public participation we've ever done. Working with the Maroochy Community Taskforce, together we are developing a vision for Maroochy in 2025. Our Community Taskforce spokesperson, Francis Howes — who's here today, will tell you its been a very exciting and challenging project to date.)

We're back on the beach and you realise the Sunshine Coast is so beautiful that lots of people are moving to the area. You recently heard the Council Mayor on the local radio station talking about Maroochy being the fifth fastest growing area in Australia. Wow, that is huge! The population of our Shire is approximately 130,000 and we receive over 700,000 visitors to the Shire through tourism annually. The geography of the shire stretches over nearly 1200 square kilometres, which is quite small considering the diversity of the area — hinterland through to beaches.

You also heard the mayor talk about the full range of services that council provides across the shire including a regional airport, childcare, libraries, building and development approval, community and recreational facilities, environmental protection, garbage collection, recycling services, together with roads and parks development and maintenance. The mayor said the council is the largest employer on the Sunshine Coast with over 1000 employees — big organisation!

As you start to feel the heat of the sun, you realise that its time to walk back to your resort. You take a deep breath and sniff the fresh air, you walk past a sign on the beach that has the Maroochy Shire Council's mission statement written on it. "Maroochy cares, Maroochy Dares". You think to yourself, what an exciting statement, this mission statement invites the community to do things differently! Yep, this truly is a remarkable place.

[End of visualisation]

How did everyone's visualisation go? Do you feel like you have a better idea about where we come from now? We hope so.

3. Where to start on the inside?

When MSC realised it needed to improve its public participation practices, we wondered how we were going to move from 'nothing' to 'something'. 'Nothing' meaning an organisation that was

getting a beating from the local media and community and 'Something' meaning an organisation that is now considered to have a best practice program in place.

As most of you will know, there is quite a few community consultation/engagement/involvement or participation policies, strategies and kits out there. To use the analogy of baking a cake, everyone's cake or product is different because we all require different ingredients.

We'll now share with you the ingredients we used to make our cake (being our public participation program), which we are now enjoying eating (and with icing on top too!).

Ingredients:

- One small group of people with a vision and commitment to drive the improvement of public participation across the organisation
- Seek IAP2 accredited training (so that staff can research, discuss and understand the principles, values and practices that your organisation wants to adhere to)
- Develop a Public Participation Strategy for your organisation — this provides a solid foundation to start building from
- Develop a specific program for your organisation — this may consist of a Policy, Manual, Champions (if you make this one look exciting enough, some staff members might start asking what is it they have to do to become a PP Champion?) Training, Integrated Reporting and Register, Intranet and Internet sites, brochures, fact sheets etc.
- Your program needs commitment from the top. It needs to be seen as a critical strategy in moving your organisation forward.

Throughout our journey, we did encounter some roadblocks, barriers or challenges if you like. The following table lists some of these barriers, but is not exhaustive either. Some of this information may sound like nuts and bolts stuff, however, we thought it would be useful for you:

Barrier	Overcoming barrier
Language	Training program to develop the knowledge and application skills of our staff and Councillors
Risk adverse mentality by decision makers	Policy adopted – mandated/incorporated into the way we do things eg. Project management framework and consultants
Costs associated with consultation (tight budgets)	Resources to it – Project Officer & now Management Committee Promotion – brochures
Staff anxiety re: raising community expectations	In presentations to Management and staff, we highlighted the benefits of proper public participation planning
Diverse skill range within organisation – some experts and some with no experience at all	Staff training
Mis-understanding of the principles and standards we were setting across the organisation (do we have to do this syndrome?)	Empowered staff to become Champions through IAP2 training and staff discussion groups High level CMT endorsement
Introducing cultural change – concepts, values, practice principles was all new	Promotion of the runs on the board (sharing the success stories and the learnings)

Its important to know that good public participation doesn't mean you won't get controversy. People very often judge good process by the fact that there is not much opposition expressed throughout the public participation or by no-one getting angry or aggressive or by no one getting attacked or verbally abused. If we hold onto such beliefs we are setting ourselves up to be disappointed. We often regard any challenges to our process as problems to be solved or avoided. We don't tend to use them to learn from and make progress.

We now have a best practice program in place and yes, we are still vulnerable to controversy. That's the nature of the beast because as a local government authority, we have to make tough decisions in a time of enormous growth in our shire. We must realise that majority of the time we won't keep everyone happy. However, what we can be confident about is that we have a six step framework which provides a solid foundation for staff to plan properly for their public participation work. Good planning allows us to be prepared and anticipate the unexpected. It also prepares us so that we can better respond to the community's needs.

Conclusion

Capacity Building – Where to start? We started on the inside and it's proved to be extremely successful for us.

In sharing our story with you, we've covered the following four pieces of information:

- Background on the Maroochy Public Participation Program
- Maroochy Shire Council — where, who and what are we?
- Where to start on the inside?
- The barriers we faced along the way and how we overcame them.

At the end of the day, we realise our public participation program is not rocket science, its common sense and this makes it meaningful for people. In our organisation, we realise that good public participation is about being brave, sticking your neck out there into the community, letting go and not being afraid of the response you're going to get. Because at the end of the day, if you've done all the preparation you can, that's all you can do!

In finishing, we'd like to leave you with this quote, which sums up what we believe you need to do to build capacity both within your organisation and within your community — take a risk!

“Risk is the refusal to forget desire!” (Sebastian Moore)

[Ends]

About the organisation

Maroochy Shire Council's mission statement is “Maroochy cares, Maroochy dares”. Their mission statement invites them to do things differently to enhance the lifestyle and environment so cherished by our community.

Maroochy Shire, at the heart of Queensland's Sunshine Coast, is one of the fastest growing areas in Australia. The geography of the area is very diverse including coastal beachfront and river areas, developing industrial and business areas, hinterland townships and large agricultural areas.

Maroochy Shire Council provides major services to a population of Maroochy of more than 130,000, over an area of 1157 square kilometres. A full range of services is provided including a regional airport, urban planning, building and development approval, community and recreational

facilities, environmental protection, garbage collection, recycling services, together with roads and parks development and maintenance.

About the presenter

Amber James

Born and raised on a sheep and cattle property near Meandarra, three hours northwest of Toowoomba, Amber L'Estrange now works at Maroochy Shire Council on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. Since graduating from her Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Public Relations, Communications and Asian Studies at USQ in 1998, Amber has worked within both the private and public sectors in her field.

Currently Amber is a project officer and responsible for coordinating Maroochy's Public Participation Program as well as a number of other community development projects, public relations, issues management and event management.

Amber holds an IAP2 Certificate in Public Participation and Facilitation.