

The *I Forum*: A New Approach to Community Engagement

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Abstract

In this interactive session, you will discover a new approach to community engagement that meets the diverse needs of participants and enables effective exchange of information, ideas, and issues; creating space for innovation and imagination. The *I Forum* has captured the imagination of local communities, practitioners and media with forums conducted to date being both well attended and received. In this session, I will walk you through the how, when and where of conducting an *I Forum*. I will also illustrate how a values-based approach, namely the values of transparency, accountability, influence and equity has informed the *I Forum* design. The emphasis of the *I Forum* is on catering for diversity in participants in terms of communication and learning styles, language, age and literacy. I developed the approach following research of best practice in community engagement in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada.

Community engagement that works? Read on

“Oh no, not another public meeting”

It is 7pm. It is winter. I am sitting in a cold hall, undecided as to whether the draft funnelling from behind is making me as uncomfortable as is the hard plastic seat on which I strain to become comfortable. The standard microphone and row of seats for speakers up the front does not feel promising. I re-examine my motivations for being here, I frantically scan the countless other possibilities and places where I would rather be, and could have been. I look back at the door, now shut, and curse for sitting in the middle of the row preventing a hasty escape. Perhaps this time will be different. Perhaps this time all will be heard and listened to, relationships built, ideas explored and constructive solutions discovered. Perhaps?

The crowd is growing excited, fuelled I am sure by the distinct scent of the blood sport to follow. The meeting is opened, a hush. The presentation begins, and then — never ends. Tension grows as the expression of anything real to anyone is suppressed by the drone of ‘facts’. Finally boiling point is reached; the games are opened by an interjector from the floor, who, now that he has the spotlight, will not allow it to be wrestled from him. Ah, yes, yet another public meeting. The scoreboard? Public meeting: wins again. Participant: nil. Oh well, I may as well hang around for the cup of tea, at least I will get a chance to tell someone something about why I came here.

The inspiration – The cup of tea

I have spent over 15 years involved in public meetings: as participant, organiser, speaker and as observer. I am yet to meet anyone that enthusiastically and consistently looks forward to a public meeting. There is good reason for this. Simply, public meetings do not work, especially when compared to people's effort in being there and the untapped information and resources that each participant has to offer. I cannot tell you how many times (as organiser) the meeting has well and truly ended, it is late, yet people are engaged in lively discussion and very few seem interested in going home. It finally dawns upon me: this, the cup of tea, is the value, this is where it happens. Following this simple epiphany, I took myself on a journey through Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, searching for different ways of conducting public meetings, so that it felt like an extended 'cup of tea'. I experimented and trialled different formats. From this the *I Forum* emerged, the formalised 'cup of tea' where there is productive exchange of information, issues, ideas, innovation and imagination.

Why the *I Forum* works

After conducting and evaluating a series of *I Forums*, I have spent some time observing and analysing why they work. In summary, the *I Forum* works as it:

- Ensures that everyone has **choice** about when, how and where they participate
- Caters for and **celebrates differences** in communication and learning styles, language, age, and literacy
- Enables you to get the information that you need and to build relationships — like a long **cup of tea** with a difference
- Ensures that there is an effective and recordable exchange of **information, issues** and **ideas** — also creating space for **imagination** and **innovation**
- Allows people to **relate** one-on-one or in a group, small or large including children
- Always **evaluated** by participants and **continuously improved**.

These success factors also underline the seven criteria for running a successful *I Forum*, which will be detailed in the session.

The nuts and bolts

In the session, we will also touch on the following questions: Who is involved, Where do I conduct one? How do I run one? (Success Factors, The Stations, The I-Ideas, Issues, Information, Innovation and Imagination, Evaluation and Reporting), case studies and the tools that you will need.

Keywords

Community engagement, diversity, innovation, evaluation, improvement