2. Why engage?

There are normative and practical arguments for engagement. The practical arguments relate to costs and benefits—always significant for practising managers. It is, however, equally important to consider the normative arguments (that is, why we should engage). Public managers might pride themselves on their practicality, but most want to understand (and where possible, to develop) the public interest dimensions of their profession.

The normative discussion inevitably takes us beyond the policy process as such, into the realms of the relationship between citizen and state. The normative arguments for enhanced citizen participation have been well set out by Fung (2006). According to this line of thought, engagement helps to overcome democratic deficits that have emerged in the functioning of modern states.

These deficits occur at four key points in the system: 1) between the interests of citizens and the preferences they express; 2) between citizens and their representatives; 3) between representatives and the policies that are really produced by the Executive; and 4) between the Executive and the outcomes that are produced. Consultative, participatory and deliberative forums provide mechanisms for decreasing these deficits and, in some ways, for bypassing them all together.

Addressing deficit one: articulating preferences through deliberation

Deliberation means that preferences are formed (and changed) through discussion with others. Forms of deliberative preference articulation—such as deliberative polling and citizens’ juries—enable citizens to come together, debate and issue recommendations on nominated policy issues. In this way, citizens do not simply articulate interests, but form new preferences as a result of debate. As Rawls puts it:

The definitive idea for deliberative democracy is the idea of deliberation itself. When citizens deliberate, they exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public policy questions. They suppose that their political opinions may be revised by discussion with other citizens and therefore these opinions are not simply a fixed outcome of their existing private or non-political interests. (Rawls 1997:772)

Note Rawls’ emphasis on the implications—practical and theoretical—of citizens’ involvement in deliberation. In so doing, they ‘suppose’ that their opinions can be changed as a result of the process.
By seeing interests as fluid (rather than fixed), deliberative techniques allow for (and encourage) free-ranging forms of debate. In turn, the idea of consultation as discerning or discovering views that are already held is transcended: it is held that views are formed through practice. Indeed, in its more radical forms, deliberative democracy transcends even the necessity for consultation, because citizens make decisions directly for themselves.

**Addressing deficit two: revisiting representation**

Where (as in Westminster systems) the political executive is drawn from the Parliament and, by definition, has sufficient control over the Parliament to pass a budget, the ability of members effectively to represent their constituents’ interests in any meaningful way is almost completely negated. Elections are infrequent and representatives might be unduly swayed by special interests, or by the dictates of party loyalty, to the extent that they struggle to represent their constituents effectively.

Improving the accuracy of representation gives us a further argument for engagement in the political sphere. Regular consultation between representatives and constituents reinforces and refreshes the mandate that election implies. From this perspective, consultation directly improves democracy.

**Addressing deficits three and four: holding public agencies accountable**

While most decision making in modern polities is undertaken by public servants, there is little capacity (according to this perspective) for citizens, or their representatives, to hold public servants to account for these decisions. Parliamentary oversight is necessarily limited. Parliamentary estimates committees have some capacity to question public servants, although the field of questioning must, by tradition, be restricted to matters of administration, rather than of policy.

Ministers are technically accountable to Parliament for public service decisions, but in practice this accountability (at least, in the form of resignation) is rarely invoked. Mechanisms of administrative law have been devised to provide a pathway for review of executive decisions: to enable citizens affected by decisions to have them reviewed by tribunals and, where necessary, by the courts. These rights, however, are granted only in relation to individual decisions—matters of policy are excluded.

Against these deficits, forms of engagement that enable citizens to have a direct input into bureaucratic perspectives and decision making have a powerful role to play. They act as a corrective to the distortional tendencies inherent in the modern technocratic state. As Fung puts it:
On many state decisions, the interests of politicians and administrators may differ from those of the majority of citizens. It is difficult for citizens to use elections to compel politicians to act to advance popular interests rather than their elite ends when elections are uncompetitive, when narrow interests oppose diffuse ones, or when outcomes are difficult to monitor and assess. (Fung 2006:672)

By opening up channels of communication, engagement (at least potentially) brings fresh sources of information and new perspectives to bear on political forms of decision making. While lobbying brings pressure to bear at close quarters (and usually in secret), the more public processes of engagement also, over time, affect political agendas. Paul Sabatier’s (1999) influential theory of coalition formation highlights the way in which the perceived need to influence government enhances learning—that is, finding new ways of perceiving problems—as well as catalysing the formation of new alliances. These processes have been shown to have a direct bearing on the content of political and, eventually, institutional (public service) policy agendas.

In sum, then, greater citizen engagement augments the often faltering processes of basic democracy by:

- counteracting the unbalanced influence of elite opinion
- bringing stronger pressures of accountability to bear
- facilitating the building of coalitions for agenda development.

**Are democratic deficits overplayed?**

Against these views, a number of theorists have suggested that these arguments are overplayed and that the normal institutions of representative democracy, as we see them operate, are sufficiently democratic for our purposes. They make the point that attempts to augment these institutions with additional, more far-reaching forms are either doomed to ineffectiveness or, worse, can actually hinder democracy.

It is true that in theoretical terms, representative democracy does not require direct engagement from citizens. The eighteenth-century conservative British political theorist Edmund Burke was of the view that a political representative owes his constituents ‘not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion’.  

In the practical sense, it could be argued that representative democracy came into being precisely in order to overcome the problems posed by direct engagement. The size and complexity of modern states make the ‘active voice’ assemblies of Periclean Athens, or the town meetings of early New England, impractical as decision-making bodies, even in very localised contexts.
As we have seen, the nature of the relationship between elected representative and citizens is clearly complex, with many possibilities for ‘disconnections’ to occur. It is clearly impossible for one member to represent voters’ preferences in any direct sense and the idea (or ideal) of delegation does not work well when elections are infrequent.

From the perspective of engagement, however, there might be more happening than meets the eye. Engagement between citizens and their elected representatives is an under-studied field of Australian political science. There are fewer safe seats than in the past and few local members can afford to neglect their constituency. The demands constituents place on their local member, whether or not they are members of the governing party, are diverse and, often, exacting. Representatives are expected to attend functions, open shows, kiss babies and, when required, make representations to ministers on behalf of constituents. Parties disendorse ‘good local members’ at their peril.

Institutionalists such as Goodin argue that, in any case, concentrating too much on day-to-day politics misses the point. These theorists point out that basic, systemic models of political behaviour do not capture the richness of overarching and intermediating structures and processes (Goodin 2003). Politicians often pretend that they can start anew with public policy, but the results of past choices are hardwired into the structures of the State. Institutional theory attempts to capture this complexity.

Institutions are, broadly speaking, the sets of rules that condition people’s behaviour. These rules are as much implicit as they are explicit. As defined by March (1989), institutions embrace routines, procedures, technologies and roles (such as those of the labour market or of public education) and are built up over many years.

In decision-making terms, these institutions have been rightly described as ‘mobilising bias’—that is, they confer access and give decision-making form to some perspectives and deny others (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). They are, however, certainly not unchanging or unchangeable. Recent work on policy values shows the extent to which institutions (and public agencies operating within them) can incorporate new and often incompatible values (Thacher and Rein 2004; Stewart 2006). When they escape these mediating mechanisms, value conflicts are powerful engines of change. Indeed, the beauty of politics is that it provides the energy to overhaul quite entrenched institutional forms.

We do not know whether improvements to the operations of representative democracy or moves towards more participatory forms are likely to yield more responsive or more informed policy. The two theories—representative versus participatory democracy—are constructions based on norms, not hypotheses that can be tested. As Sabatier has argued, these positions can be more usefully thought of as lenses, rather than theories. At the academic and the practitioner
levels, it is a matter of applying the lens that seems to most usefully illuminate
the reality under review (Sabatier 1999). As Fung points out, there is a need to
democratise the policy process; the issue is how best to accomplish this goal.

Why engage? The policymaking perspective

In relation to policy making, the normative, democratically oriented literature
shades into (and often overlaps with) more practically grounded analyses, which
canvass the ‘why engage’ question from the perspective of costs and benefits,
advantages and disadvantages.

In policymaking terms, the benefits relate to:

• improving information flows
• seeking a diversity of views
• obtaining early warning of problems
• tapping into community resources
• political management.

Improving information flows

Many public managers might wonder why one would choose to expand the flow
of information coming into government. There would already appear to be ample
opportunities for those with something to say, or simply some kind of grievance,
to access politicians, particularly those at the local level.

On the other hand, public bureaucracies are often shielded from the communities
they serve. While public servants who deal directly with the public often have
a good sense of what people want, those further up the hierarchy must direct
their attention upwards and outwards, rather than downwards. For most citizens,
most of the time, the fleeting moment of choice when they cast their ballot is as
close as they get to exercising political influence.

Ministers with executive power are busy, preoccupied and often remote figures.
Ministerial advisers, dedicated to advancing the political interests of their bosses,
control access to them. Indeed, as close gatekeepers, they can fashion the policy
agenda by facilitating access by some groups at the expense of others (Ryan
1995). These advisers must be the eyes and ears of ministers, but at the same
time, they have been known to shield their ministers from accountability through
the mechanism of ‘plausible deniability’ (Tiernan 2007; Stewart 2008a). Ministers,
in turn, are subject to unremitting pressures. The type and quality of information
reaching decision makers are subject to significant distortion in these situations.

Open consultative channels provide at least the possibility for the views of
service deliverers, clients and consumers to reach decision makers. More
participatory forms of governance bring these views into the heartland of
government itself. To the extent that information flow of this kind becomes
routine, rather than being dependent on particular consultative occasions or pretexts, the more likely it is that policy will adjust to circumstances in real time.

Enhancing diversity
Consultation, even community consultation, does not automatically enhance diversity of input into decision making. The ‘community’ is an elusive concept that can often be defined only in relation to the policy issue itself. This ‘community of fate’ (Catt and Murphy 2003) might be coextensive with the general public or it might be a particular subset of that public (for example, the community of people living adjacent to a proposed development).

The distortional aspects of ‘open’ consultation are well known. Those engaged in consultative processes are likely to be better educated and more articulate than their fellows and often have powerful views to push as well. One Dutch consultation (on urban regeneration) found that almost all the participants were white, middle class and male (van de Meer and Edelenbos 2006). In the Australian context, studies have found that conventional consultation excludes ‘hard-to-reach’ groups such as migrants and Aboriginal people (Cameron and Grant-Smith 2005).

On the other hand, policy advisers who are wise to these traps can enrich policy making by deliberately seeking out other views. Policies that target particular groups are a case in point. Policy makers who talk to drug addicts and drug dealers, for example, as well as to professionals in the field, might find that their initial assumptions or preconceptions—indeed, the way they construct the issues in their minds—need to be adjusted in the light of ‘reality testing’ in the field. Governments have found that successful policy often depends on close and continuing contact with marginalised groups. To this end, Australian governments have funded, among others, peak bodies representing refugees, people with AIDS and sex workers (Sawer 2002).

Policy communities that privilege certain forms of knowledge can be daunting for outsiders to penetrate. (If you don’t understand the acronyms, you are probably an outsider.) Indeed, it seems to have been with the idea of breaking through existing, bureaucratic mind-sets that Prime Minister John Howard brought executives of not-for-profit groups into the inner circles of policy making during the production of the McClure Report into changes to the welfare system (Stewart and Maley 2007).

Early warning of problems
Complex systems go wrong in unexpected ways. Hierarchical organisations notoriously quash warnings and dissent from within, making them vulnerable to unpleasant surprises. Where ‘capture’ by external interests has occurred,
decision making can be distorted in ways that are no longer clearly visible to those within the organisation. Particular ways of proceeding have simply become institutionalised, without appropriate risk analysis being done.

By engaging with outsiders, managers might not only uncover new sources of intelligence, they might gain a warrant for speaking truth ‘up the line’. Regulators, such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), are increasingly discovering the importance of soliciting and using personalised forms of knowledge—for example, by encouraging consumers and insiders to report price-fixing arrangements. The Australian National Audit Office, too, makes use of intelligence from the field.

**Tapping into community resources**

Professionals tend to view ‘the community’ as an amorphous mass of mainly untutored individuals. Every community, however, contains people whose knowledge is of the utmost value to public servants. Retirees, for example, are an often-overlooked source of wisdom. Many have ‘seen it all before’, but their successors might be all the better for knowing that they are neither the first (nor the last) to embark on a particular endeavour.

Partnering with community groups (for example, through environmental programs such as Landcare) brings not only the budgetary blessings of volunteer labour, but the immediate, practical knowledge of those directly involved with the issues at hand. Implementation is a detailed business. It cannot be managed solely from Canberra or, for that matter, from state capitals.

**Greater problem-solving capacity**

Complex problems pose difficulties for hierarchical organisations. Bureaucracy rests on the functional division of responsibility—this is the source of its well-known efficiency. Where issues are well structured and are not subject to rapid change, conventional bureaucracy is highly effective.

There are, however, many fields in which these conditions do not hold. Environmental questions continually challenge us, precisely because our conventional bureaucracies divide ‘the environment’ up according to developmental priorities. Thus, agricultural departments help farmers to produce. It is with difficulty that they become departments of sustainable farming (although there has been remarkable movement in this direction). Generally speaking, bureaucracy prefers to put ‘production’ in one box and ‘the environment’ in another, relying on interdepartmental mechanisms of various kinds to resolve coordination problems.

As Australians are discovering, water management is particularly challenging because of the complex, multi-level negotiations that must be undertaken if change is to be successful. Not only governments, but communities, individuals
and their collective organisations are involved. Social policy, too, if it is to be at all sensitive to individual circumstance, must be alive to the possibilities of co-production. Fung, citing Booher and Innes (2002), puts the matter well:

> Problems that involve interdependent actors who have diverse interests, values, and experiences, such as in many kinds of natural resource management and economic development problems, have often proven resistant to traditional top-down, state-centred mechanisms and methods. (Fung 2006:681)

If collective action is to apply at all in these situations, it must be inter-organisational and it must engage interests in new ways. The resulting configurations will need to be based on networked information and decision-making flows, with new relationships between ‘top’, ‘middle’ and ‘bottom’. There are numerous examples where we see the beginnings of these new forms, although in some cases their development has been delayed by centralising tendencies and in others by the adaptive prowess of existing public agencies (Stewart and Jones 2003).

**Problem solving through enhanced learning**

How do participatory forms improve on the learning implied by conventional politics? Dutch network theoreticians have arguably gone furthest in identifying the nature of the problem-solving capacities of interactive networks. Thus, solutions are reached not by conventional means, but by tapping into ‘on-the-ground’ or ‘real-time’ perspectives.

Edelenbos describes the theory of interactive learning in this way:

> Process-oriented policy making is directed towards the design and management of a process which allows these actors and their problems and solutions to interact, to learn from one another, and to derive new, shared problems and solutions. (Edelenbos 1999:570)

It should be emphasised, however, that these theoretical arguments are only as good as the practical realities they make possible. It is also true that the academic literature must be sensitive to meta-evaluation, to learning, not simply from essentialist prescription, but from lived experience.

**Political management**

While it is not often brought out into the open, the main motivation to engage might have little to do with knowledge, resources or problem solving. For the practising manager, consultation will often be related to the need to craft politically acceptable compromises, or to keep interests with the power to frustrate a particular policy ‘inside’ rather than ‘outside’ the tent.
More generally, consultation is a good way to ‘keep track’ of the needs and opinions of key interests. Reporting against service levels, for example, is an excellent way of highlighting achievements and marketing change, and of matching expectations with deliverables. For service providers at the local level (for example, local government), regular consultation of this kind kills several birds with one stone.

**Summing up**

There are strong normative and practical reasons for those in government to engage with citizens. The normative arguments relate to the tendency for modern representative democracies to become distant from citizens. Very often, these ‘democratic deficits’ can be addressed only by deliberately restructuring or otherwise improving channels of communication between citizens and their elected representatives on the one hand and between citizens and executive decision makers on the other. Engagement improves legitimacy for these reasons.

In the practical sense, there are benefits from engagement for public managers employed in policy making and in administration. Engagement improves the likelihood of successful policy by enhancing information flow and encouraging diversity of policy advice. Of course, there are risks associated with engagement as well as rewards. Consulting the ‘community’ might privilege some groups at the expense of others. Nevertheless, in many fields (particularly those where many different kinds of actions must be coordinated), the benefits of engagement would appear to outweigh the costs.

**Endnotes**