

“NINE QUESTIONS” A Planning Tool for Stakeholder Engagement

Adapted from Jim Shultz of the Democracy Center

Nine key questions to consider in developing an engagement strategy

Common scenario: You and your organization have a vision, and a project with objectives that support that vision. **Now you need to enlist the support of stakeholders: people and organizations with the potential to affect the outcomes of, or be affected by, your project.** You easily get some supporters, but some key stakeholders are harder to engage than others. What do you do?

An engagement strategy helps you systematically identify and engage with a broad range of stakeholders whose support (or lack of opposition) will help you achieve your goals. It serves as a map that clearly shows where you are, where you want to go, and how you can get there, and it helps inform your use of engagement tools such as events, meetings, and social media.

A strategy doesn't have to be a formal plan – at its heart, creating an effective strategy just requires that your effort considers these nine key questions:

1. What do you want? (OBJECTIVES)

Any engagement effort must begin with a sense of its goals. Among these goals some distinctions are important. What are the long-term goals and what are the short-term goals? What are the content goals (e.g. behavior change) and what are the process goals (e.g. fostering collaboration among stakeholders)? These goals need to be defined at the start, in a way that can launch an effort, draw people to it, and sustain it over time.

2. Who can help give it to you? (KEY PLAYERS)

Who are the people and institutions you need to move? This includes those who have the actual formal authority to deliver (i.e. specific government officials, businesses). This also includes those who have the capacity to influence those with formal authority (i.e. experts, related government officials, businesses, community leaders). In both cases, an effective effort requires a clear sense of who these stakeholders are and what access points are available to engage with them.

3. What do they need to hear? (MESSAGE)

Reaching these different audiences requires crafting and framing a set of messages that will be persuasive. Although these messages must always be rooted in the same basic truth, they also need to be tailored differently to different audiences depending on what they are ready to hear. In most cases, persuasion messages will have two basic components: an appeal to what is right, and an appeal to the audience's self-interest.

4. Who do they need to hear it from? (MESSENGERS)

The same message has a very different impact depending on who communicates it. Who are the most credible messengers for different audiences? In some cases, these messengers are "experts" whose credibility is largely technical. In other cases, we need to engage the "authentic voices," those who can speak from personal experience. What do we need to do to equip these messengers, both in terms of information and to increase their comfort level as communication partners?

5. How can we get them to hear it? (DELIVERY)

There is no one right way to engage stakeholders. The most effective means will vary depending on the stakeholder and the situation. In some cases it might be a one-on-one meeting; in others it may be inviting a stakeholder to a project event. The key is to evaluate and apply different stakeholder engagement methods appropriately, weaving them together into a winning mix.

6. What have we got? (RESOURCES)

An effective persuasion effort takes careful stock of and builds on the persuasion resources that are already there. This includes past work that is related, alliances already in place, your staff and membership capacity, and other people's capacity, information and political intelligence. In short, you don't start from scratch, you start from building on what you and your friendly stakeholders already have.

7. What do we need to develop? (GAPS)

After taking stock of the resources you have, the next step is to identify the resources you need that aren't there yet. How will they be met? This means looking at alliances that need to be built, and capacities such as outreach, media, research, and internal abilities, which are crucial to any effort.

8. How do we begin? (FIRST STEPS)

What would be an effective way to begin to move the strategy forward? What are some potential short term goals or projects that would bring the right people together, symbolize the larger work ahead and create something achievable that lays the groundwork for the next step?

9. How do we tell if it's working? (EVALUATION)

As with any long journey, the course needs to be checked along the way. Strategy needs to be evaluated revisiting each of the questions above (i.e., are we engaging the right stakeholders, are we reaching them, etc.). It is important to be able to make mid-course corrections and to discard those elements of a strategy that don't work once they are actually put into practice.

Some Helpful Tips:

- To be useful, the strategy planning process requires:
 - Systematic and disciplined effort.
 - On-going action, reflection, and refinement.
 - Research and planning to tailor your strategy to your context and capacity.
 - Time.
 - Flexibility and the ability to work in a non-linear order.
 - The ability to give a diagnosis (to understand the current reality, what is possible, and how to get started) despite uncertainty or incomplete information.
 - Willingness to experiment and to learn by doing.
- You may find you naturally ask the Nine Questions in a different order – or ask different questions entirely! We encourage you to try this model, and adapt it to fit your own style and experience.
- You may not be able to answer all of the questions at first, and may need to gather more information along the way. You may revisit one or more stage throughout the process. You may not have answers to all of the questions. Don't be discouraged! Over time, you will learn which questions to ask and how to find the answers you need. You do not need to answer all the questions with certainty to decide next steps.

- Strategy planning often works best as a participatory process that draws upon multiple perspectives. We suggest working in a group – with members of your organization or with friendly stakeholders– to develop and refine your strategy.
- Some groups will need more time to address the questions. This may be true if the group is newly formed; lacks consensus on the goals of engagement; or group problem solving. Remember, **learning by doing** is a core principle of the engagement process – we encourage you to take the time you need.

