



facilitating a culture of participation

Participation – Blip on the Radar or New Paradigm?

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Is citizen and employee participation just a blip on the radar - the flavour of the month – maybe the year? Is it an add-on, a slight turn of the dial? Is it a utilitarian means to an end?

Does it have, wired into its core, genuine value beyond the content results of a meeting? Does it provide us with a new foundation? Does participation involve a fundamental shift in our thinking that alters our basic philosophy and approach? Is it a dimension of a new paradigm, a new way of being and working together? Is this a revolution – evolution in human affairs?

Participation is sometimes seen as debate and confrontation where there are a few winners and a lot of losers. We have been well trained in those methods. I've heard people call very ordinary conversations debates and I'm referring to people in casual conversation about a topic.

Participation is used as a forum for government departments, lobbyists and experts and it can too often be a thinly veiled sales job in which persuasion wears the guise of inviting input. Public consultation is often a frustrating exercise of responding to prepackaged solutions resulting in little change. In the name of participation, people are floated a balloon and asked if they like it; kind of taking the public temperature. Many businesses and organizations are structured to isolate decision-making authority in a small, senior leadership group or one individual with any meaningful input sought within a tight circle. PowerPoint presentations with the tossed off, "Are there any questions?"

Popular community organization techniques have been based on the assumption that local people must make demands of those who are really responsible. It's called participating. Standing outside the gate throwing dirt clods as participation in public policy and program formation? Development projects are all too often created by experts and taken to people for their concurrence or minimal modification. They call this local participation and actually get away with it. Makes ya say, "hmmmmmm".

"All in all, you're just another brick in the wall", said Pink Floyd. Makes it sound like a something that can't and probably shouldn't last. It seems like participation has become one of those really great sounding words that has been grabbed and twisted by the marketers, consultants and bureaucrats until any real meaning and authenticity has been squeezed out of it entirely.

But cynicism comes easily. It's not difficult to find the rips in the fabric; especially when the stakes are so high and we are all so well informed. It's easy to feel that participation has become one of those socially comforting euphemisms used to lull us to sleep. We say to ourselves, "They ask questions and say they seek input, but are they really listening? Will they actually use my ideas? Is this worth my time and energy?"

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We become isolated and alienated from the choices that give our lives texture, shape and meaning. We hope someone will think things through and act on our behalf. At the same time we cry in the dark, because we feel ‘they’ are not listening. We shut down and sit as the judge of the actions of others. It’s real paradox and we get caught in it all the time.

No wonder they call it “the matrix.” Want the blue pill of carrying on with life as is or the red pill that launches a quest into the unknown where we might find some truth?

Garrison Keillor, on the Prairie Home Companion radio show, once said, “The antidote to cynicism is curiosity.” A curious statement itself, that. Sounds dangerously like a red pill to me.

What happens when we explore our situation in the world or our organization with an open, curious mind? In the movie, Morpheus says to Neo "You have to understand that many people are not ready to be unplugged, and many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it." Will our favorite assumptions hold up if exposed to light? Will we find ourselves actually having to change our minds? Imagine that. Scary business. If what you really want is to maintain your position of power and control, it’s very risky, Pass the blue pill, please.

That’s what curiosity does. It bumps us out of the comfortable seat of simple thinking. Open thinking put the “sacred cows” that have held our illusions about the world in place in serious jeopardy. Trinity says, "It's the question that drives us, Neo." Once we take that red pill, we cannot be the alienated, critical, passive consumer or the isolated leader giving directives anymore. The red pill of curiosity drives us to ask open questions, think things through and abandon conclusions until we actually get to them in the end. We are given the bum’s rush out of detached cynicism and we get plunged into taking responsibility for the relationship we assume toward our situation. We become explorers and seek new perspectives and understanding. Conversations become open inquiries. Certainly, curiosity is neither easy nor simple, but it releases the human spirit.

Marshall McLuhan said, “The medium is the message.” He talks about a ‘message’ as, the change a new innovation introduces into human affairs. So, he’s not talking about the text of what we write, say, tweet or broadcast, but an alteration in the pattern of human interaction; how we relate to each other and to the world. He’s telling us that how we do what we do really does matter. The way we do things actually does communicate something; sets the stage for what can happen. For participation as a deeper message, that’s a just wee bit on the radical side.

He also says, in addition to saying the medium being the message, “The content is the audience.” Radical, radical and even more radical. He doesn’t say the content is for the audience, he says it actually is the audience. That’s us. We are the ones with the thoughts and ideas about our situation. The content is our own hopes and dreams, our questions and conundrums, our insights and judgments. It’s our life.

Let’s look at participation in this context. Let’s say we take the red pill. Let’s say we are looking for ways to actually recognize those around us as the content. We’re used to lectures. We complain about PowerPoint presentations in the dark and “death by PowerPoint”, but a lot of them still happen, every day, every meeting. It’s like we’re stuck in a weird ‘do-loop’. The “content” comes from experts and leaders. For many, the best participation gets is the question and answer period at the end of some talk. Then we wonder why things don’t get done, why plans go off the rails and why people are so disengaged. The content, in this case is not the audience, but for the audience. Serious head scratching. Are we just using a cute 20th century technology to make the best of a medieval modality?

Without question, authentic, meaningful participation introduces a new way of doing things together. It is a red pill. No question there. To facilitate real participation, to actually begin with questions and trust those gathered to form new insight is truly a different modality.

The assumption underlying authentic participation is that each person has real wisdom about their situation and the group needs all of it in order to make the wisest choice. The whole produces understanding, insight, meaning, decisions and results far beyond the simple sum of the parts. Something magical happens when a group shares their wisdom and seeks to see the connections among their ideas, the commonality in their thought. It spirals them deeper, beyond the surface level of arguing among people, to synthesis of thought. It gives them a new sense of themselves as a group. They took the red pill and their world opened up.

I encountered an international aid agency that, working with a local government unit in Southern Africa, dug wells for each village in its district. On their monitoring trip, they found most of the wells in a state of disuse, disrepair and contamination. To their credit, they asked around and discovered that the people regarded them as government wells and felt no responsibility for their upkeep. In order to give the villages a genuine sense of ownership of the wells, it was necessary to go back to each village to hold a community meeting involving the residents in making plans for ongoing well upkeep. People not only learned about well maintenance, but by making the plans themselves and carrying them out, they assumed ownership of the wells and responsibility for their water supply. They wove caring for the wells into the fabric of their community life. Engaging people in a real dialogue over the necessities of their own situation transformed them from passive receivers of external service to active participants in meeting their own needs.



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I participated in a community consultation in an isolated, rural Egyptian village. In answer to the question, “What would you like to see in this community five years from now?” the overwhelming response was clean water. In spite of marginal education, limited literacy and minimal exposure to science, everyone knew that it was contaminated water that was killing them and their children.

They dug a well, laid pipe, set up a very basic water system and it was not long before gastro-intestinal problems and infant death due to dysentery and dehydration declined dramatically. The flies disappeared from the children’s eyes once it became easy to wash.

Authentic participation is becoming recognized as an essential part of a healthy society that fulfills a basic aspect of human character. People are no longer willing to passively accept their circumstances. They want to take part and participate directly in making the decisions and changes that affect their lives and complaining is just not enough. We are seeing it happen right around the world.

Leaders are becoming facilitators in a continuous development process rather than directors that produce a pre-planned result from a script. Facilitative leadership is emerging as a new way of seeing the task of guiding groups. It is beginning to mean creating original plans based on the ideas of the members and a group consensus. The emphasis is shifting from control and confrontation to dialogue and cooperation within and among communities, agencies, development organizations, governmental units and the private sector.

If we begin to view participation as a genuinely new paradigm, it can launch new levels of genuine dialogue. Real conversation, respectful of the value of the participants and their input, acknowledges and includes a variety of perspectives and uses the ideas to form consensus. Participation can be a process that empowers people to become the active agents of positive and significant change.

Methods, processes, techniques and structures that maximize citizen participation in our communities, projects and organizations are a critical need. We need training in methods of participation that draw out creativity and insight, develop consensus, release motivation and result in positive action. Methods and tools for participation can enable groups to analyze their situation, develop a shared vision, discern necessary directions, identify projects, create action plans, carry them out, hold accountability and learn for experience. We need ways to structurally integrate meaningful participation into our community and organizational life.

The key to authentic participation is beginning with a question. Beginning with an answer, whether it comes from leaders or participants, limits participation, creativity and innovation. Brainstorming is a great start. Each person’s wisdom is valued. All responses are included and the only questions in a brainstorm are those that allow the group to understand each idea. If the process stops there, it is simply a technique for eliciting data. People paper the walls and go home— cynicism pretty solidly intact.

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Groups involved in brainstorming need structured ways of processing their ideas. Whether they reflect on the ideas, cluster them or identify priorities, a collection of individuals begins to become a group. They see common patterns of thought and the connections they discover bring them together. The ideas now belong to the whole. They can move on to form a consensus appropriate to their common question. Plans and decisions become the property of the whole group.

Authentic participation builds a sense of unity and common ownership of what has been created. It motivates people toward positive action and instills a sense of responsibility for what happens. Commitment is a word we're so terribly afraid of uttering and the quality that is so desperately needed in our organizations and communities. A dimension of truly sustainable development, organizational change or continuous improvement is the development of capacities that enable people to make and pursue genuine choices.

If our efforts are to actually benefit the people of the world, build strong communities and viable organizations, we are going to need everyone's imagination, creativity and energy. We need to begin acting as if participation is something far beyond a fleeting fancy and weave it into the fabric of our common life. We need to put in place a new social modality – a new way of being together. Once you take that red pill, there's no going back. You're conscious, inquiring and questing. To quote Tracy Chapman, we're "Talkin' 'bout a revolution"