Communication counts

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Communication Counts

Christine Gibbs Springer

Despite heightened rhetoric about engaging citizens, improving customer satisfaction and restoring public trust in government, little significant or sustained success in doing so is evident across all levels of government. This may be due as much to the complexity of our system of government as it is to a reluctance to engage. After all, to do so requires an organizational commitment to delivering results, acting with integrity and transparency, truly listening and communicating clearly with all stakeholders. And, what are the consequences of not doing so?

To not do so eventually leads to discovery by activists and to community and voter distrust. To not do so sends a message that public managers believe themselves to know what's right for citizen customers even when those citizen customers are doing everything possible to tell them to go in another direction. To not do so supports the worst case made about government and public management intentions.

To trust the voice of citizens by soliciting their input and acting on what they say isn't easy but it is necessary. It starts by understanding how citizens interact with government and then requires that public managers speak plainly to citizen customers rather than through encrypted or compressed jargon that protects them from accountability as it enshrouds them and the whole process in red tape.

In the State of Washington, for example, the Department of Revenue tripled the number of businesses paying the use tax on products purchased out of state-collecting an extra $800,000 collected over two years—by rewriting one letter so that it was more understandable. Words such as abeyance, cease and utilize and to eliminate the use of legalese, acronyms and jargon when communicating with constituents.

Traditionally, citizens interact with government in one of three ways:

- As a consumer of government information like statistics, data or regulations. This kind of interaction is evolving around the world from one of simply an "information exchange" to one of "information processing" wherein citizen communication ranges from passive-informing citizens of planned efforts to active-empowering them to directly participate in decisions often through the use of new technology like modeling, simulation and decision support technologies (MSDSTs).
- Citizens are also customers of government services like planning and zoning, public safety, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. These interactions require citizens as consumers to differentiate between the tangible quality of the service provided and satisfaction with how the service was provided. As an example, physicians tend to be evaluated by patients based both on medical outcomes and their bedside manner.
- Citizens need to understand that at the most basic level, every government agency's citizen customers can be divided into three categories: advocates, apathetics and assassins.

Advocates will do anything to support what the government and the agency does whether that be out of loyalty, necessity or understanding. To do business with their favored agency, they will travel farther, pay more and offer copious amounts of free advertising and volunteer hours to further your agenda.

Assassins, by comparison will suffer great inconvenience whether it be at public meetings or through persistent blogs to raise objections and put up communication barriers as well as to avoid doing business with the agency. They will do everything in their power to make sure everyone around them feels the same way.

Apathetics, who statistically make up both the largest group of customers in business and the largest number of voters, are not necessarily dissatisfied. They just don't feel any loyalty, bond or commitment to the community or the agency as do advocates. Often, they are pre-occupied with other things. As a result, Apathetics will continue to do business with the agency and remain compliant as long as someone doesn't come around with a better offer—which in today's environment is just about every day.

To be successful in dealing with citizen customers requires finding a way to keep Apathetics from becoming Assassins and to develop Advocates into Activists...and to turn Apathetics into Advocates and then Activists over time rather than having them fall into becoming Assassins.

One of the most effective ways of doing so is through good, understandable, consistent and continual communication. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation found when it implemented Plain Talk in five urban neighborhoods in 1993 (Atlanta, GA; San Diego, CA; Seattle, WA; Hartford, CT and New Orleans, LA), public policy works best when decision makers, community leaders and citizen customers communicate effectively.

Their program helped adults, parents and community leaders develop the skills and tools needed to communicate effectively with young people about reducing adolescent sexual risk-taking. After four years, they learned that the principles for success included:

- Community residents should be central to the decision-making process about the program because those residents have the biggest stake in changing community behavior and norms.
- Residents need to come to consensus about what changes in the program are necessary. They are only able to do so if they are able to speak plainly and openly with one another. Government agencies need to listen to the resident recommendations.
- Communities need to have access to, or the means to obtain, reliable information about the problems and practices that they are trying to address and that the information needs to be communicated to them in understandable ways and....
- Adults need to understand the reality that some youth are sexually active. Such an understanding can only occur when those adults are able to communicate openly, plainly and without bias to the affected youth engaging in conversations about how to develop strategies suitable to their own culture and circumstances.

Just as good businesses have learned that incorporating the voice of the customer in everything they do from product design to service delivery will distinguish them from their competition, so too public agencies that communicate effectively not only build community but community trust. Five crucial rules help to make process effective:

- Never underestimate the emotional power of human nature and the desire to belong.
- Reach out to citizen customers and don't simply wait to hear from them because then it will be too late.
- Set standards and note when those standards fail to be consistently met because that happens community support is about to dissipate.
- Build a sense of community through continual communication and by trusting the voices of the community in responding to clear requests for input, feedback and guidance not through the creation of new institutions and....
- Speak plainly by avoiding encrypted and compressed jargon such as it occurs when a group of people reason a problem... then begin concepts that rest on other concepts and eventually need a compressed jargon or acronym to boil the bunch of words down into one...over time some members of the group use the new terminology to impress others with their understanding of the special language which conveys portions of the message from those coming in late to the process...and the words and jargon become the standard for thinking about new policies and processes.

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