

# Bright Ideas



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## Consultation and collaboration in change management

Lately, I've started to wonder if I'm the only one bothered by people treating different words as if they are interchangeable. This season, it's collaboration, consultation and communication. In the realm of change management, choose the wrong one at your peril.

### Defining terms

**Collaboration** creates solutions over time as partners, with shared decision-making power and shared accountability for success. Collaboration is mainly used with complex problems that have a major impact on stakeholders, but the necessary stakeholder buy-in is not ensured.

**Consultation** gives stakeholders opportunities to provide input at or near the start of the change process. Those consulted inform the decision-makers—who are solely accountable for success—of relevant issues or facts to influence decision-maker perspectives. The decision-makers may choose to use or ignore the input.

**Communication**, in this context, has the decision-makers presenting key information about change plans have made and giving stakeholders a chance to ask questions and make comments.

The goal is for stakeholders to understand the changes and their implications. Unlike consultations, where the decision-maker mainly listens and asks questions, in this type of change communication, the decision-maker(s) does most of the talking—either presenting the plan or answering questions.

A previous post described issues and best practices in change communication. We will focus on consultation and collaboration here.

### Consult or collaborate?

Ultimately, the choice to consult or collaborate comes down to issues of power and responsibility. In hierarchical systems, the leader is seen as

responsible for success. Leaders in this model succeed by inspiring, incenting or requiring that those who must carry out the decisions do so effectively and efficiently, regardless of what they believe. A bad idea will fail on its own lack of merits. A *good* idea succeeds only if the leader inspires those who must implement it.

The key to successful implementation of change is stakeholder ownership. Inspiring leaders stimulate personal ownership of the leader's idea. The rest of us build

ownership through either early consultation or collaboration.

Consultation leads to stakeholder ownership when the leader is able to maintain the stakeholder vision of the outcome and how to get there. I was once part of a team whose mandate was to conduct community-driven research. We consulted every few years to find out the issues our community felt we needed to address. They came in once; we did their high priority research and presented them with the results. Unfortunately, those results were pretty academic and, often, totally useless to those who had asked for them. We were too far removed from the daily challenges of our stakeholders to pro-

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duce results they could and would use. The solution? We shifted to a collaborative model. Stakeholders would commit to giving direction to their high-priority projects to keep them on track via a few meetings or phone calls. We still did the work, but they kept us on track. Instead of us struggling to get results out and in use, they did a lot of it for us because they had ownership.

Leadership and accountability for success are often shared and people expect to be included in decision-making and plans that affect them in ways they care about. For those in charge of change management, an important step is to identify the key stakeholders to consult or collaborate with.

### Consultation 101

Be careful not to see change as a strictly internal process. Employees, customers or clients, vendors or suppliers and, sometimes members of a geographic community may all be affected and expect to have a say. However, their issues and perspectives are different, and what will entice one group to the table will not work with others. The key to the invitation is to emphasize “what’s in it for me” where “me” is the target stakeholder group. Likewise, the invitation has to recognize the way they like to contribute (e.g., meeting,

survey, wiki) and their availability. For example, some groups (e.g., employees, suppliers) are available only during working hours because the issue is considered part of their work. Others (e.g., community members) are only available outside working hours because the issue is not considered part of their work. An important part of consultation is having large numbers participate (relative to the overall size of the stakeholder group).

Trust, as ever, is an issue. If past history shows that you have not made use of what stakeholders told you and not communicated why—or have twisted what they said to fit what you wanted to do already—stakeholders are less likely to participate.

### Collaboration 101

Collaboration generally involves smaller numbers of participants from each stakeholder group, selected on the basis of their connections with others. Invite people who are actively engaged with their stakeholder group and will communicate with them to both keep them informed and gather information about their needs and issues. This is harder than you may think. People are generally better at representing their own position and experience with passion than that of others. Have several individuals

represent each class of stakeholders to ensure diversity of experience and opinion.

Give participants enough time between meetings to communicate with those they represent and get good information. Support the expectation of broader communication by sharing the questions to be answered in a timely way. In these days of expected transparency, it is worth having each meeting end with agreement on what should be communicated. What is being considered? What decisions have been made and on what basis? Be active in the communication process, and encourage stakeholders who are not at the table to add their 2¢ worth.

By communicating openly all along the way and encouraging feedback, you can build trust and broader ownership of the change process. When people feel their concerns and ideas have been considered seriously, they are more prepared to listen and work together for the common good.

### Check This Out

[How good are your change management skills?](#)

[The 3 Cs – Communication, Consultation and Collaboration](#)

[Collaboration video](#)

*From Where I Sit*



## Evidence-based decision-making

I am a firm believer in making decisions based on data—whether the data are from research investigations or documented experience. And although I like to talk, I learn much more when I listen and only speak to ask for clarification or more detail.

Any researcher knows that all evidence is not equal. Some sources are flawed by the method of collecting the evidence. Other sources produce data that are open to interpretations other than the ones of the authors. And some data simply do not address the issues. It’s important to ask what you really know and how you know it.



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