



DIALOGUE
PARTNERS

Bringing people together

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10 Lessons we have learned

At Dialogue Partners, we're fans of top ten lists: top 10 words of the year; top 10 foods that will make you healthy; top 10 wines of the year...So we thought, why not a top 10 list of things we've learned? In reality, this list could be the top 1000 things we've learned, but we know you might not read it if it was that long, so we're starting with 10 things.

① **Embrace your enemies.** Those people who are opposed to your issue or working directly against it should be welcomed in to your public engagement process and events and given opportunities to share their views. They are going to be sharing their perspective with others anyway, so you should be open to hearing it first. What is the very worst that could happen? You might understand them a little better, and they might understand you. You might start to build a relationship. You might agree to disagree. Doesn't sound that bad after all, does it?

② **There are no enemies.** OK, so we know our earlier lesson was to embrace your enemies, but our next lesson is that there aren't actually any enemies in a public engagement process. There are just people who want to be heard, who are passionate, who may have a different perspective than you or your organization. If you can think about all participants in a different way, and not put on your armour for a battle with some invisible enemy, you'll find that maybe those people who don't agree with you are actually just people with something to say that is important to them.

③ **Keep your promises.** This one is public engagement 101, but it is also the very foundation of trust. You need trust to engage meaningfully, and you need it from your clients, organization and participants, and you get it by keeping your promises. That means you should keep your big promises, but it means your little baby promises too – like when you will call people, or post reports, or answer questions. In the end, participants don't trust your degree, your name or

your organization – they trust YOU, and you have to earn that trust.

④ **Political rhetoric will sink everyone's ship.** Political campaigns are focused on one primary objective: winning. There is no place for winners and losers in a meaningful public engagement process. While not all political candidates are personally focused on winning and losing, their desire to serve the public can't be fulfilled unless they actually beat their opponents and win their elected office. If you can, stay out of public engagement during election season. If you can't, then be sure your communications, events and approach all reiterate for participants what commitments and intentions you can keep, and that your process is being conducted in good faith. Failing that, make your issue and process front and centre for political candidates, so they engage in a meaningful way on the real issues, with your participants.

⑤ **Hold Hands with your clients.** We know, this one sounds a little weird. You weren't expecting advice on how to find a date, right? We don't mean you have to literally hold hands – we mean you should do it emotionally. People aren't born knowing how to talk about complex, emotional issues. Technical experts like engineers, architects and scientists are trained to solve problems – their professional training is focused on finding the right answers. Some of the things you need to do for meaningful public engagement may make some of your clients uncomfortable – and that's OK. You would be uncomfortable being asked to build a bridge if you hadn't been trained to do it, right? Everyone needs support to make this work, and that means your client as well as your participants.

*"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.
It is the only thing that ever has."*

- Margaret Mead



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⑥ Roller coasters are good for your mental

health. First, we'll be honest about the fact that we really love roller coasters, so any opportunity to encourage people to ride them is good. That said, public engagement on controversial, complex or conflictual issues is like a roller coaster ride. Any attempt to smooth the track will just cause the cars to derail. Any attempt to slow things down will mean you don't make it up the big hill. You've probably figured out by now that you can substitute roller coasters with emotions in this lesson, and you'll get our message. Embrace emotions in your process: anger, grief, frustration, cynicism...yours, your clients, and your participants. If you do that, the ride might be a little wild, but it will be joyous too, and you will reach your destination in one piece.

⑦ All you have is your integrity. There is a reason why most professions have codes of ethics or professional standards: they guide the practice; they measure your performance; and they set the bar for professional integrity. IAP2's Code of Ethics references important issues like good faith, not polarizing communities, advocating for the process and not an outcome. You can find the Code of Ethics at www.iap2.org. Our lesson here is that these standards aren't negotiable – they don't say "keep these standards unless your client is paying you and they ask you to do something different..." Be true to yourself, honour your participants and respect your client – and then make the best decision that lets you look yourself in the mirror each day.

⑧ If your knees are shaking, that is a good thing. Like the roller coaster, things that make your knees shake are good for your soul. We have learned that the unexpected, nerve-racking moments of life are the times when you learn the most, when the opportunity presents itself to have courage or serve the people in your process just a little better. We've had some unexpected scary moments over the years

that made our hearts pitter-patter, but when we've owned those moments and focused on what the people in the room really need, we've had real success. We remember that "it is not about us" and that helps us stay standing despite the shaking.

⑨ Do things where there are no guarantees. There is no certainty in life, despite all of our attempts to make things perfect, sure and absolute. Our experience has taught us that a little discomfort is the source of creativity, effort and ideas. That doesn't mean you should make your participants sit on the floor and hug each other, but it does mean you should go ahead when not everything is certain, when you, your client and your participants do not have all or many of the answers – and see what happens. The most amazing things can occur.

⑩ Practice gratitude. We believe this is the best job in the world, and we are so lucky to have it. To do good work that makes the world a little better for people, (or sometimes a little less worse in a hard situation), and to honour the voices and stories of amazing people: this is a gift. We've learned that being grateful for participants makes a difference to them too; they can tell when you really care, and when their views really matter. Now you can't fake it, so don't pretend to be grateful or we can guarantee that will backfire. We had a wonderful client who once joked that "empathy is a strategy" and that is not our lesson here. Be thankful, and show it. You get back what you put into the world, and we're grateful for the opportunity to have learned enough lessons to be able to make a list like this.

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