

Practising Public Consultation

By Tan Yew Soon

At a Public Consultation Forum held in May this year, Tan Yew Soon, Director of Feedback Unit, gave a practitioner's view of responsive government and active citizenry. He illustrated basic principles and considerations to guide effective consultation by looking at consultation efforts for the Body Worlds Exhibition, the Junior College/Upper Secondary School Review, and Marriage and Procreation. He also highlighted various resources available to help the civil service develop its consultation capabilities, including the new Consultation Resource Portal (www.intranet.consultation.sg). An edited excerpt of his speech is below.

The Body Worlds Exhibition

Story One. September 2003. The Media Development Authority (MDA) received an application from Arts & Science (Singapore) Pte Ltd to stage a controversial exhibition in Singapore that would feature preserved human bodies. I believe you are familiar with what was called the Body Worlds Exhibition.

Both MITA and MDA recognised the controversial nature of the Body Worlds Exhibition. They were concerned that some religious groups might feel that dead bodies should be treated with respect, and an exhibition of this nature would invite protests about the commercial exploitation of the dead, who are not in a position to protest. They were not wrong. In Europe, Roman Catholics and Protestants denounced the exhibition as a breach of human dignity. There were also questions about the source of the dead bodies, and accusations that Von Hagens, the German anatomist who pioneered the plastination technique of preserving human bodies, stole them.

There were other sensitivities. The exhibits were graphic or "gross". Imagine a full figure of a pregnant woman with her stomach cut open to reveal a 5-month-old foetus. Such exhibits could offend some members of the public.

So, MDA decided to seek public views to gauge the level of acceptance for such an exhibition. Was the consultation exercise useful? It certainly was. MDA made good use of the diverse range of views tossed up to manage the controversial issues effectively and to strengthen their decision-making. Based on the feedback, MDA did a few things. One, it advised the organiser to provide adequate information about the exhibition to alert visitors to the possible disturbing nature of the exhibits. Two, it advised the exhibitor to carry advisories in its publicity materials. Three, it advised the exhibitor to require children under 12 to be accompanied by an adult. And four, MDA informed the exhibitor to provide clear and educational labelling for its exhibits. This enhanced the educational value of the exhibition.

Fundamentally, the clear sense that MDA got from the consultation was that Singaporeans wanted to be informed and to decide for themselves. At the end of it all, when the exhibition was held, MDA did not receive any adverse reaction. On the contrary, the feedback was favourable.

Review of Junior College/Upper Secondary Education

Story Two. In 2002 the Committee for the Review of Junior College/Upper Secondary Education was formed to develop a revised JC curriculum framework and to articulate a vision for JC/Upper Secondary education. The committee held a major public consultation exercise which included feedback sessions, focus group discussions, internal consultation sessions, dialogue sessions, and study trips to several countries.

The committee's consultation provided enriching feedback. In particular, some of the feedback identified key challenges for the committee and helped to shape the recommendations. Let me give you two examples.

First, the committee recognised the need to broaden the curriculum and inter-disciplinary orientation, and noted strong public feedback on the need for flexibility and individual choice. As a result, the committee recommended that JC students should take at least one Arts/Humanities or Mathematics/Science subject outside their main area of specialisation.

Second, there was extensive concern about the workload and stress on students. As a result, the committee recommended that the content of each subject be trimmed so that the overall load would be comparable with that of foreign education systems.

In addition to the useful feedback received, MOE had also picked up several important learning points from the consultation exercise. I will highlight two here. First, consultation played two key roles. Besides providing public views, consultation was also a useful means to communicate the intent and thinking behind the issues to stakeholders. This was based on the belief that every contact with the public should be used as an opportunity to engage them and to build understanding and support for public policies.

Second, MOE decided on two key messages for the review, and communicated them at the various consultation fora. Initially, however, the public missed the point that the review would improve JC curriculum for all students and not just the best students. So, in addition to communicating the two key messages, MOE came out to emphasise more strongly that the revised JC curriculum would benefit all students. In this instance, public consultation had helped to fine-tune the public communications strategy.

Marriage And Procreation

Let me move on to **Story Three**. We come back to the present—2004—public consultation on making more babies, or to be more exact, Marriage and Procreation. MCDS started the massive exercise last year, and consultation is still going on. How has it gone so far?

To their "horror", MCDS learnt that couples did not want to conceive until the procreation measures are announced in August. They were holding back their baby-making! Couples thought that they would benefit only if they conceived after August. Acting on this feedback, DPM Lee had to tell couples not to wait; Minister Yaacob Ibrahim did likewise. Here again, we are reminded that consultation is an integral part of the public communications strategy.

Other pieces of useful feedback surfaced. Public messages had focused on centre-based care but MCDS found that the public also wanted other forms of infant and childcare. It is also interesting to note that while there is support for eight weeks of paid maternity leave, there are female employees and younger parents who prefer to have shorter maternity leave spread out beyond the eight weeks or over the initial years of childhood.

Given the range and diversity of issues relating to Marriage and Procreation, public consultation has helped MCDS to identify key issues and to enable the Steering Group on Population to adopt a holistic approach to the population issue.

In all three cases, the benefits gained from public consultation were clear. But, if there had been no public consultation, would the agencies have been incapable of making sound policy decisions? Would public communications necessarily have fared badly? Frankly, no. But policies were clearly enriched by the diversity of views and a more holistic approach to policy-making. Policy decisions and public communication plans were enhanced by a better sensing of public sentiments and reactions.

Five Steps to Effective Consultation

We can draw important lessons from these three stories on what contributes to effective and successful public consultation. I would like to highlight five contributing factors.

First, MDA, MOE and MCDS were genuine in wanting to consult the public. They were clear about why they wanted public consultation. Importantly, they were willing to consider public views seriously in their decision-making. All three had set clear objectives for their consultation. In so doing, they were setting the parameters for discussion and were able to focus the participants

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on specific issues or concerns of importance, and to manage their expectations of how far the discussion could go.

Second, the agencies provided participants with sufficient background information on the issue. Where possible, background information should be provided in advance of the consultation activities. This is to help participants prepare for the discussions.

Third, a wide range of stakeholders was consulted to ensure a diversity of views. The appropriate stakeholders were carefully identified. In the case of the JC/Upper Secondary Education review, the stakeholders included internal stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers and school leaders, and MOE HQ officers, and external stakeholders such as school alumni, educators, professionals, businessmen and Members of Parliament. Beyond Singapore, the committee drew from best practices in top schools in Hong Kong, China, the United Kingdom and the United States. The list of stakeholders to be engaged depends on the issue and the scope of the consultation exercise.

The fourth contributing factor for effective consultation is the use of multiple forms of outreach. This depends on the scope of the consultation. MCDS has used a variety of tools for their consultation on policies to promote Marriage and Procreation. These included focus group discussions, surveys, e-consultation papers, emails, a hotline, and study trips to European countries. The JC/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee also made use of focus group discussions and online consultation, as well as video conferencing. Such a multi-pronged approach helps to reach out to a wide range of stakeholders. Significantly, having multiple feedback channels, including electronic channels, also makes it easier and more convenient for the public to participate.

Last but not least, the fifth factor. Get back to the participants and inform them of the outcome of the consultation and how their views have contributed to the outcome. MDA issued a press release at the end of the consultation exercise to inform the public about the approval of the Body Worlds Exhibition and, importantly, how they had acted on the public feedback solicited.

The education committee published a "Report of The Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee". In addition to the committee's recommendations, the report highlighted a summary of key findings arising from the various consultation activities and the feedback channels used. The committee also gave a copy of the report to every participant of the focus group discussions, and posted a soft copy on the MOE website. These are all various ways to close the loop with your feedback contributors.

To summarize, we need to:

1. Clarify the objective and scope of consultation,
2. Provide sufficient time for consultation,
3. Provide timely and accessible information on the issue to be consulted on,
4. Enable a diversity of views, and
5. Close the feedback loop.

Initiatives for Consultation

The challenge for us is to develop service-wide capabilities in public consultation. A number of initiatives are already in place to help ministries and government agencies do so. First, the Civil Service College has started a two-day public consultation workshop. The first run in April was a great success. The objective of the workshop is to equip officers with the knowledge and skills to plan and organise consultation activities. You will learn about the reasons for and benefits of consultation, when to consult and when not to do so, the tools and

techniques of consultation. You will also learn about the strengths and limitations of each of these tools and techniques, such as focus group discussions, public forums, online consultation, different types of polls, hotline, and others.

The second initiative is the Feedback Unit's Consultation Portal' (www.feedback.gov.sg) that was launched in April last year. The Portal offers a variety of consultation channels, such as the e-consultation paper, that you can leverage on to solicit public comments on your policy issues. Agencies that have used the e-consultation paper facility have found it a useful channel.

The Unit is now ready to launch an e-polling facility, having completed the testing and having resolved some technical problems. E-polling will be a good complement to the e-consultation papers you are currently doing.

The Consultation Resource Portal (www.intranet.consultation.sg) is another major initiative to help build capabilities for consultation within the Public Service. We can certainly learn a lot from each other by sharing our experiences in public engagement, not just the good practices, but also the pitfalls and mistakes. The Portal is also a window to learning best practices from other countries, such as the US, Canada, UK and Australia, which have a longer history in public engagement. We also have established a set of consultation guidelines which are available at the portal.

Last but not least, the Feedback Unit is ready to help agencies develop their capabilities in public consultation. The Unit provides consultancy services to agencies in this area and helps them plan and organise dialogue sessions. ■