

Practicing Participation, methods and stages Empowerment Tools 3

This is one of the series 'Empowerment Tools' produced by Jim Simpson
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Introduction

We have many different terms for *involving people* in public services and voluntary organisations' work – public engagement, involvement, empowerment, participation, co-delivery and consultation. This brief paper unpacks the differences in these terms and the approaches to working with the public or with several 'publics'.

It is really important to know about the differences and similarities as it is critical that public services get as *dialogue competent*, appropriate and authentic as they can. The better the dialogue competencies a service provider has, the better they can achieve positive outcomes for their people, build trust and continually improve.

This paper is part of the Empowerment Tools series and it is aimed at any public service, third sector organisation, and participants in these activities. All public services have many different relationships and expectations between providers, their 'people' and the political process.

We general use the generic term 'people' to denote the people for whom a service or activity is being provided, or any other people who benefit from a service or activity. This helps with a clearer understanding as 'people' is a less loaded term than citizen, patient, student, resident, client, service user, customer etc.

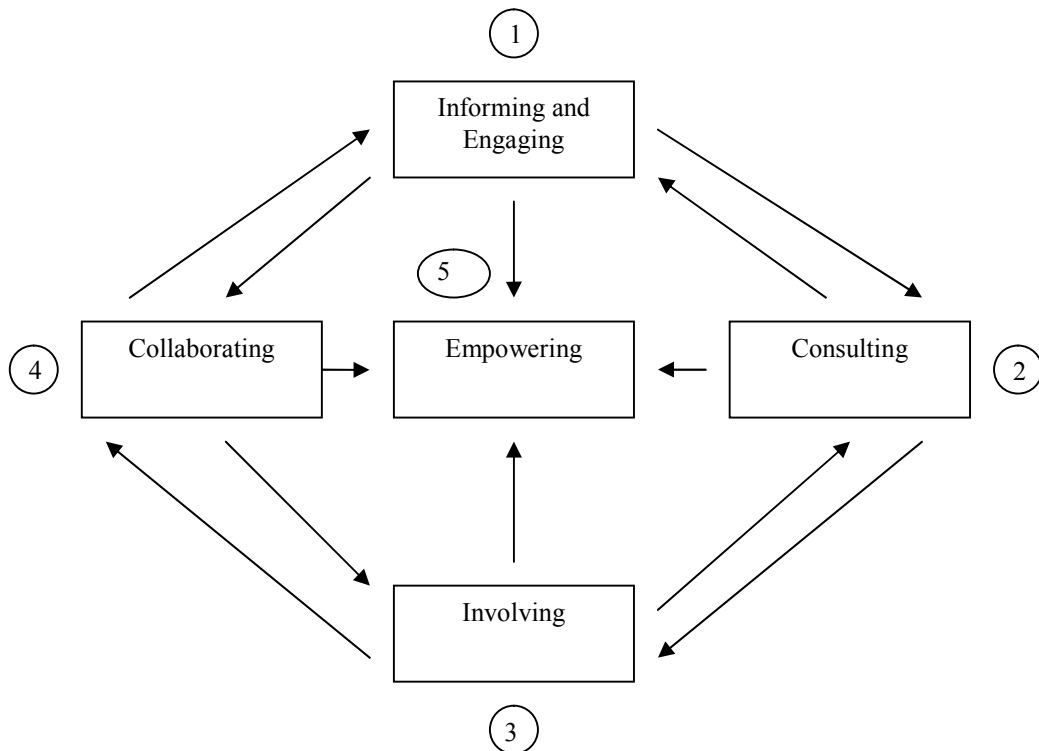
Empowering people, groups and communities works at many levels and is both a process and a goal. Service providers are reliant upon relationships with their people and usually the action and *agency* of people or groups is needed to achieve outcomes – however empowering or dis-empowering the delivery models may be.

Service providers may want to be fostering more empowering ways of providing activities – thus a process. They may also want to achieve a goal of a better of different power relationship, changed decision-making or ownership for instance, such that more or better empowerment across the board is achieved. This is empowerment as a goal.

The ultimate goal of empowerment, 'total empowerment' if you like, is that people who have a stake in something or are receiving a service have control over it – control over their destiny. This is not necessarily about who receives or delivers services; it is more about control over the service/activity. The process of empowerment involves four logical steps and types of dialogue - *informing and engaging*; *consulting*; *involving*; and *collaborating* (illustrated in the diagram below).

Each step involves a gradual sharing of influence, power and control and each step has a value in itself.

The Cycle of Community empowerment¹



Community empowerment is a stepped process because the natural, organic process of power sharing requires the organisation – public body, voluntary organisation, community group or company – to do a number of things in a dependent order, to enable influence and power to be shared.

For instance, to *consult* with communities or with partners *informing and engaging* them needs to have taken place. Similarly in order to *involve* people and bring them to the table *consultation* needs to have taken place. Empowerment research tells us also that the players – citizens, services workers, managers and policy makers – need to work through one stage in order to get to another.

There are no short cuts up the chain of empowerment. It involves building trust and confidence, working structures, relationships and capability over long time frames and using dialogical methods, processes and forums appropriate to both the activity and the general approach that the organisation displays in working for, with and on behalf of its people.

¹ This model is developed in part from the International Association of Participations' Public Participation Spectrum at <http://www.iap2.org/?A5>

Stage one - *informing and engaging*

People start to feel a sense of becoming empowered when they have easy access to regularly available, consistent, good quality information. Organisations can not hope to consult or involve citizens and service users without people who are participating having good knowledge. Similarly professionals can not hope to provide a good service without good quality experiential knowledge from their communities and service users.

The public promise here is *“we’ll keep you informed”*

Community engagement is a more active way of informing people and is often confused with community involvement and collaboration. In practice, it is the process of getting a service or a facility to the people who might use it. Many service providers use community engagement techniques to extend and promote their services to ‘under-represented groups’ or in order to reach the ‘hard-to-reach/find’. Community engagement is valuable and informative for both sides of the services delivery transaction. However it is not necessarily concerned shifting influence and power from service provider to service user. Typically it gives the service provider broader and deeper intelligence and feedback.

Stage two – *consulting*

This is about asking people what they think and feeding back to them the results of their contribution. Our research particularly emphasised the need for people to be heard and really listened to and to receive feedback and updates on the result of the opinions or user-expertise they had provided.

The public promise here is:

“we will listen and acknowledge your preferences, needs, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, aspirations and hopes”

Stage three – *involving*

Involving people is where power begins to be shared. It involves processes that recruit views, experience and expertise from people and communities. A non-optional co-development approach is reflected in the making of all future plans, designs, options, choices, resource deployment and decisions.

The public promise here is:

“We will make sure your views and preferences influence the outcome”

Stage four - *collaborating*

As the name suggests collaboration involves all parties in ‘co-evolving’ or ‘co-creating’ activities. It involves the public and the specific beneficiaries of a service or

facility becoming a co-opted partner with real influence and power over what happens.

The public promise here is:

“We will invite you to participate in formulating solutions and incorporate your preferences into the outcome”

Stage five – empowerment

There is a fifth stage where *full empowerment* is taking place and people are deciding what is done for them, with them and to them. This is where empowerment is the goal and either professional put into place the choices, preferences, aspirations and goals of citizens² or people do it for themselves.

Empowerment or something close to it is variously known as ‘delegation’ - internally within organisations whether public, voluntary or private sector; ‘decentralisation’ - within large organisations and government bodies; and devolution or subsidiarity - within and between nation states and their government organisation. This is part of the broad ‘new democracy’ and ‘participatory democracy’ approaches that go further than the natural limits of representative-electoral democracy.

The public promise here is:

“we will implement what you decide”

Informing, consulting, involving and collaborating with people are all important ingredients to delivery services. Empowering processes are all necessary to mature public service and third sector service-delivery, and they are more and more essential processes to business delivery too.

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The Empowerment Tools Series comprises 6 papers all available in the free [Resource Library](#) area at www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk and at the Local Government innovation and development [website](#)

‘Empowerment Tools 1 – Healthy Partnership Checklist’ is a checklist for reflection, learning and evaluation for anyone involved in supporting partnerships. It

² For a fuller analysis of ‘democratised public organisation see the novel LME (Leadership Management and Expertise) model paper at: <http://www.jimsimpsonconsultancy.co.uk/resources-library/leading-lme-model/>

is easy to use collaboratively or individually and will help you evaluate the key building blocks to a healthy partnership.

‘Empowerment Tools 2 - Practicing participation, methods and stages’ revisits and relocates the international practice ideas about the stages of participation in public places and what this means by way of the public promise that service providers are making to local people.

‘Empowerment Tools 3 - Partnership with Purpose - Involving All the Players’ is another short think-piece that explains the different roles that are key to unlocking the power and potential for an empowered, people-driven public sector.

‘Empowerment Tools 4 - Consumer or Citizen, theory and practice’ debates the theory and idea of empowerment from different viewpoints. Empowering people, communities, citizens and services-users will be critical to the public sector and third sector organisations ‘doing better’ rather than merely ‘doing more for less’. This paper locates both participative and ‘market’ theories of the public sector in a brief and comparative analysis.

‘Empowerment Tools 5 – Public Sector Professional Work and Social Capital’ is a shorter think-piece that emphasise the need for public organisations to nurture social capital rather than ignore it or act against it.

‘Empowerment Tools 6 - Discovering ‘Facilitative Public Management’ is an ideas paper drawing together all of the empowerment tools research. It contrasts the best of a new and more innovative style of public management and decision making with the disadvantages of mechanistic public management that dominates our public services. Whatever your point of view or your role in any public service or community there is something in this for you!