
Experiences in Public Participation:
The Facilitating of Large Events
www.culture.alberta.ca
Alberta

We hope you find the document helpful. Should you need additional information you can contact the Community Development Unit at 780-427-2522 or CommunityDevelopment@gov.ab.ca.

CONTENTS

EXPERIENCES IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:
The Facilitating of Large Events

INTRODUCTION

Events inspire and motivate us, by calling forth our participation and wisdom

There is a tremendous sense of fulfillment that comes with the exhilaration when, as a facilitator of public input process, you work with and observe hundreds or even more than a thousand people come together in one place and attempt to change their world. In Alberta, for more than ten years, government entities have been the catalyst in empowering and enabling citizens to participate in creating their collective future, in solving issues of concern and in advising their leaders in the development of public policy.

The bringing together of people with very different views from all walks of life and divergent communities to engage peacefully in dialogue about common issues is quite amazing. The design, management and facilitation of public input processes require a principled approach. The protocols and frameworks which guide such work need to be developed from real-life, on-the-ground experience gained through working with communities. How can government institutions and agencies, acting for and on behalf of their citizens, work with them in building programs and policies to address those issues and to serve those communities?

The work in public participation overviewed in this document was done by a group of people - Community Development Officers, their managers and support staff - who have all belonged to a Branch and Ministry of the Alberta Government. The Branch changed its composition, its name and its ministry several times over the period of time in which the work was done, and thus we seek to avoid confusion by naming them, from this point on, the Branch. This group of people constitutes a community of practice that conducts effective and meaningful public involvement in both rural and urban communities.

Our Branch has played a lead role in the facilitation of a large number of public participation events in the province of Alberta over the last decade. Our clients have been the provincial government as a whole but more often were individual ministries or other Government of Alberta (GoA) entities. The projects involved broad public or stakeholder input into client-specific content. The intent of this document is to share the things that we learned about putting together and running such events. We present our learning for the use of others who are embarking on similar ventures of seeking public input.

The material presented in this document is based primarily on our experiences leading and facilitating events held in Alberta during the period 1997-2007. They went by many names – Summit, Symposium, Forum – but what they had in common was that they brought citizens and stakeholders, from all over the province and in great numbers (often several hundred to 1500 people) to a central location, face-to-face, for a day or two. The content of these sessions was specific to the particular government entity hosting the event but the processes and the delivering of them were the responsibility of a team made up of a Lead Facilitator (or two), process facilitators and support staff from our Branch.

Each project or event we delivered was unique. We learned clearly that the different sizes, intended outcomes and complexity inherent in them required different approaches. The configuration and composition of the team changed for each project as did the processes used to plan and run the sessions. This document presents our experiences and learning and provides the flexibility to readers of selecting those ideas that are appropriate and necessary to achieve useful and significant results for their own situations. The material here is grounded by our key principles of public participation. As such, this document is a guide and a support for planners and facilitators of large, public events and while the purpose of those that we delivered was for government entities, we believe that the ideas presented here would be useful in many other formats for clients of any sector.

BRANCH KEY PRINCIPLES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EVENTS

We:

- ✓ believe that everyone has wisdom; we need everyone's contribution to achieve the best results; *
- ✓ believe that those who are impacted by decisions have a right to have input into those decisions;
- ✓ accept, as professionals, that we are accountable to achieve the contracted deliverables;
- ✓ achieve the best results by using the most appropriate processes;
- ✓ will maintain our neutrality with regard to the topic of discussion;
- ✓ achieve the best results when respecting each other and working as a team;
- ✓ respect and support the decisions made by the Lead Facilitator;
- ✓ will allocate and utilize our resources in an efficient and responsible way;
- ✓ will take every opportunity to learn from our experiences and to share what we learn with others.

* *Adapted from ICA Associates Inc.*

PART 1

GETTING STARTED

Most of the projects our Branch was involved with over the ten years were initiated by another Government of Alberta entity. They began with an initial request for our involvement. The request could have been received by any individual staff member, a manager or the Director. It might have come through a phone call, an email, a fax or some other written form. Every request was unique. Size, location, nature of the participants, content, processes, etc. varied for every project.

When a request was received, a commitment to deliver service was not forthcoming until our managers and Director were satisfied that we had enough information to know that both our client and our Branch would experience a successful outcome in running the event.

The first step, then, was gathering enough key information. The most essential information for our Branch to have, in order to make a decision to proceed with a project, came from questions such as:

- What is the name of the individual calling and what group does that person represent? What is the relationship of the caller to the event owner(s)? What authority does that person have to make the request?
- What is the name and other pertinent information of the organization – phone number, address, key contacts, etc.
- Why do they want us? What do they want to achieve? (This will assist in identifying expectations and clarifying that the client understands the services we can provide).
- What is the event about? What decisions, if any, will be made or expected to be made with the information, the results, or the process used at the event?
- What are the desired results? What outputs are expected? When the event is completed, how will the outputs from the event be used?
- What is the history of the event or events leading up to it?
- Who is affected by the event and who may be the participants?
- What specific service(s) are being requested?
- What are the current concerns/opportunities?
- What is the requested delivery date?
- Where is the event to take place? Why?

Assignment of the Lead Facilitator

Every effort was made to get as much information as possible to envision possible outcomes of an event; approval to proceed was only given once success was assured.

A strong, trusting relationship between the Lead Facilitator and the client is a key and essential element of a successful even

With approval, the Director of the Branch would assign a Lead Facilitator. The person with this function had the most important role in the project and he or she had to have a very special set of skills and credentials in order to fulfill the many tasks and responsibilities of the position.

The Lead Facilitator had to be greatly competent: experienced; highly skilled; and knowledgeable in all of the principles and practices involved in public participation processes including a broad range of facilitation methods.

The Lead Facilitator was responsible for, in general terms:

- being the Branch contact with the client and negotiating the working relationship;
- working closely with the client in planning and delivering the event;
- designing the schedule and processes of the event (or at least providing input);
- providing and overseeing the facilitation staff responsible for the processes;
- working with the client in coordinating all of the different players during the event – client representatives, security, media, speakers and presenters, facilitation staff, etc.;
- managing the overall process at the event – including, for example, the opening and closing plenary session; and
- delivering the data generated at the event to the client.

Accountability of the Lead Facilitator

From the outset of the project, it was extremely important that everyone involved had a clear understanding of accountabilities and lines of communication. This was especially important for the Lead Facilitator. Once a service agreement or contract had been signed with the client, accountabilities and communications with the client could be made clear. However, the Lead Facilitator also defined accountabilities and lines of communication with the Director, managers and staff in the Branch. These responsibilities varied with each project but could never be overlooked.

Setting the Parameters

Initial meetings between the Lead Facilitator and the contacts from the client organization were important opportunities to:

- build relationships and trust;
- continue to share more information;
- learn about the client's intended outcomes;
- begin to design processes; and
- envision a successful event.

Signing the Service Agreement

Once the Lead Facilitator and the Client were confident that they could agree on the essential concepts of the event, a service agreement or contract would be signed.

Service Agreement Basics

1. Expectations of Results
- Make sure these are clearly stated and agreed to by all parties
- Ensure that the client and the Lead Facilitator clearly identify and agree to the outputs* of the event (see example below)

2. Roles
- Clearly define the roles of the Branch and of the client in the event
- Outline the Branch's capacities, resources and limitations in carrying out its role
- Include a statement of what the Branch will not do as part of the event

3. Budget
- Estimate the time required of all Branch resources (Lead Facilitator, facilitation team, technical and administrative staff, etc.)
- Estimate the cost of resources such as Branch staff's time, travel and other expenses
- Determine who will pay for Branch costs

4. Duration of Service Agreement
- Specify when it begins and when it ends

* Outputs could include:
- achievement of "content" goals as planned
- completion of the event agenda as planned
- completion and identification of any experiential changes in participants as planned (i.e. learning, perspective changes, etc.)
- provision of all raw data as an information source for a final report

---

From the initial request to the setting of the formal service agreement with the client, an evolving process, resulting in a decision on the framework of a public participation event, occurs. This is just the start, however, of a journey in which an abstract concept becomes an exciting event.

PART 2

PRE-PLANNING

As planning for the event begins, the Lead Facilitator, working with the client contacts, must get a handle on the “big picture” surrounding the project. This early phase of the project sets the stage for everything that will follow. We grew to know that careful consideration of the significant variables outlined in this part was critical to the successful design and delivery of a public input event.

Cultural Considerations

A good beginning is to do some research about the history of the event. We depended on the client contacts from the various government entities to let us know what kinds of input had been done with stakeholders. In some instances, there had been many interactions, at a regional level, and our event was just the culmination of a long string of public participation events. Often, there had been none and stakeholders participating in our event were new to interaction with government. We have always felt that you can never dig too deep here; the more you can know about the participants in a public input event, the better you can be in creating a relevant and valuable experience for them and for the client.

It is vitally important, through this initial research, to be able to anticipate the mood or mindset of the participants coming to a large event. We dealt with everything from reluctant participation and scepticism all the way across the spectrum of emotions to unbridled enthusiasm and tremendous interest and energy.

Some of the questions we asked, during the pre-planning stage, included:

- Do the stakeholders believe they can make a difference?
- What information and understanding of the issues do they have?
- What are their expectations of the event?
- What is the level of trust between the stakeholders and the government entity?

Being aware of and acknowledging the range of emotions and motivations at play during the event has always been a great measure of success for us.

Participant Selection

The client was responsible for selecting and inviting participants to the large public input events. We made a point of providing our thoughts about the process as well as suggesting, in support of our principles, a variety of methods for participant selection. We felt it our responsibility to explore and broaden the client's definition of potential participants in order to ensure that those participants would appropriately reflect the "community" that was impacted by the issue being addressed at the event. *

Participants were selected from two types of groups:

- the public at large; and
- stakeholders.

At times, public at large meant anyone living in the province, but usually we saw these people as citizens interested in or impacted by the topic being addressed at the event.

Stakeholders were identified as individuals or organizations playing an important role in the subject area or possessing expertise in the topic. Stakeholders were deliverers and consumers of service, advocates, researchers or decision-makers.

We encouraged the involvement of a broad range of community representation, depending on the topic, from:

- seniors;
- youth;
- Aboriginal people;
- other cultural and ethnic groups;
- persons with disabilities;
- rural residents;
- urban residents;
- Individuals from various socio-economic levels; and
- special interest groups.

**** It is interesting to note, that in some cases, we found that having more participants at a given event didn't necessarily increase the "productivity". In fact, 100 participants sometimes created as much information for the client as 150 or 200.***

The following is a list of possible methods for selecting participants to a large event.

Methods of Delegate Selection

Method	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Random sample of public	This method is typically conducted by an outside agency. It generates a representative subset of the population in terms of age, gender, socio-economic level, etc.	• Provides a representative cross-section of the population. • Is seen to be a non-biased participant selection process. • Participants can provide a balance to the discussions, bringing different perspectives to the issue and/or topic.	• Does not guarantee that participants will have any interest or base level of knowledge in the topic. • Participants may have to be provided with information to ensure they have a base level of knowledge. • Level of commitment to participate in the event may vary; attendance may be affected
Self - selection by public and stakeholders	This method allows participants to attend by registering or submitting an application to attend.	• Participants usually have an interest and base level of knowledge in the topic.	• No guarantee of a representative cross-section of the population. • Delegates may all have the same opinion on the topic. • May allow advocacy or special interest groups to attempt to dominate the agenda.
Invitation to stakeholders	This method allows the customer to invite the identified stakeholder groups to select representatives to send to the event. The invitation may include some suggestions about the selection of the participants (age, geographic area, and topic knowledge level) that help to establish a representative sample.	• Participants will likely have a base knowledge of the topic. • Some of the participants will be experts in the field.	• There may not be a representative cross section of the population. • Stakeholder bias may limit their creativity and exploration of the issue.
Combination of public and stakeholders	This is a combination of a random sampling of public and an invitation to stakeholders. It provides a potential balance of all the perspectives.		

Some factors influencing the number of participants invited to the event include:

- size of the facility;
- intended outcomes or results;
- level of discussion or input desired; and
- budget.

Some things that influence the ability of people to attend the event are:

- location;
- cost to the participant;
- time of the year;
- time commitment required to prepare for and attend the event (reading, travel, etc.);
- transportation issues;
- child-care expenses;
- loss of income (time off from the workplace); and
- special needs requiring on-site support.

The largest, best attended events in which we were involved, provided participants some form of reimbursement for expenses, especially for low income people, single parents and persons with disabilities. In these instances, the client believed that it was important for people wishing to participate to not be prevented from doing so because of financial limitations.

Facility Considerations

Next to picking the date of the event, booking the facility is one of the first and most important things to accomplish. In most cities, large facilities are booked well in advance. For our projects, most often the hosting ministry had already chosen a time frame and location before we were invited to join the team. Most often, our events happened in larger urban centres in Alberta and there weren't too many places that would accommodate over one-thousand people. We rarely had the choice of facility and sometimes, even had to share the facility with another concurrent event. Sometimes the space for our events was perfect, many times it wasn't. There are always many challenges in facilitating a public participation event. The facility and its limitations is one of those challenges but with time we learned how to make the best of almost any physical space.

Our Lead Facilitators have been in the practice of visiting the chosen facility early in the pre-planning stages. Viewing the facility at this time is critical in making appropriate decisions about the event.

It is important to know the:

- **size of the space for plenary sessions;**
- **number and size of rooms for breakout sessions and their distance from the plenary room;**
- **availability of facility support staff;**
- **availability of IT, audio and other technical support staff;**
- **type and number of available tables;**
- **availability and utility of wall space (for process materials);**
- **location of windows and any barriers such as pillars and doors;**
- **location of electrical outlets (for AV equipment, laptops, telephones, etc.);**
- **internet access;**
- **the pathways and supports for participants to move from place to place (hallways, stairwells, elevators, etc.);**
- **supports for people with special needs;**
- **proximity of hotels, public transportation and other necessary services for participants;**
- **parking availability; and**
- **availability and supports for food services**

The physical attributes and limitations of the facility were important factors in planning the event. Those factors contributed to determining:

- how many participants could be invited and accommodated;
- the length of time of the event;
- the design of the process;
- the number and size of small discussion groups; and
- planning the program including making enough time for participants to move from room to room and allowing for appropriate breaks and meals.

Other facility aspects which we tried to establish or have in place on-site included:

- office space – ideally this was a centrally-located room in the event facility where administration and data management for the event could occur;
- space for client representatives and the lead facilitator – to address the need for a quiet, secluded space where people in charge of the event could discuss sensitive issues;
- space for the facilitators and others involved in the delivery of the event – ideally this was a space where these people could get away from the public eye; it was a place for them to relax, take refreshment and/or work;

- break-out rooms for small-group discussions that could accommodate the work to be done as well as movement in and out, particularly for people with special needs;
- fire escapes and routes to assist people who might fall ill or need other emergency attention; and
- communication devices available in break-out rooms in the event that facilitators working in those rooms might require assistance or immediate support.

All staff working the event thought that written information and maps, in advance of the event, were useful in informing them about:

- the location of all on-site working spaces;
- the ways and means to contact site managers or attendants for facility issues such as room temperature or furniture requirements;
- the ways and means to contact personnel to assist in any emergency situation; and
- the means and times when breakout rooms would be available to facilitators for process preparation and set-up.

Event Context Setting

1. Pre-event communications

There is a direct link between the pre-event information delivered to the public and the processes that will occur during the event. As much as possible, our Lead Facilitator tried to work closely with client representatives in the development of pre-event materials such as advertisements, questionnaires, and/or workbooks for event use. The Lead Facilitator must be aware of the information being given to the participants.

2. Pre-event activities

Our Lead Facilitator made every effort to be aware of and even, perhaps, attend any pre-event activities with the public, whether these same people would be attending the planned event or not. Examples of these pre-event activities included such things as focus groups, mini-conferences or written surveys or questionnaires.

3. On-site communications

Normally, government clients used their own communications people particularly to deal with and support VIP's attending the event. These public relations people also dealt with any public disturbances such as pickets, displays or marches. Our Lead Facilitator and other working staff always knew who the public relations staff were and how to reach them.

4. Working with the media

Our government clients usually had their own staff assigned to work with the media. However, it was important for our Lead Facilitator to work with the client staff in establishing good arrangements with the media that were mutually beneficial. Each event seemed to have a different approach. Media personnel were welcomed and usually were provided with a wide array of opportunities to be involved in the event. Occasionally, however, media were restricted from small group discussions. While the public events in which we participated were just that, very public and widely publicized, sometimes the topics were sensitive or emotionally-charged and clients, as well as our staff, often sought to protect participants who were there and sharing very personal stories.

There is a fine line to be walked between guarding the privacy of participants *versus* the need for the process to be open and transparent. We normally wanted to ensure that participants at the event could feel free to speak openly in small group discussions without the fear of being quoted by media.

5. Working with observers

As with the media, a balance must be struck between respecting the integrity and privacy of discussions during the event and the openness of the process. In many of the events in which we participated, there were observers – often client representatives – who wished to watch the proceedings. Our Lead Facilitator tried to establish a rule or policy with the client regarding observers. Generally, we attempted to see that observers:

- were there to listen only;
- were discouraged from moving from group to group so as not to disrupt proceedings;
- were allowed, if at all, in small group discussion rooms in limited numbers in order to be invisible or unobtrusive in the process.

6. Using resource people

Sometimes our clients would provide people well-versed in the event topic to participate in the small group discussions. They were essentially observers who weren't there to influence the discussions or decision-making in any way, but if a group got bogged down over a technical issue, the observer would be invited by the facilitator to offer any information or explanation that might offer clarity to the discussion. Resource people were located either in each small group discussion room or centrally located on-site where they could be called into a small group when and if necessary.

7. Managing data generated during the event

We experienced almost every possible scenario with regard to handling the data being generated at a public participation event. Sometimes the generated information was recorded on-site with reports being made available before the end of the event. Occasionally, the client provided staff to record data during discussions, usually on laptop computers. Frequently, facilitators processed data during the days after the event and quickly provided the Lead Facilitator with the material for delivery to the client, usually within a week of the event. On a few occasions, facilitators physically packaged up flip charts, cards, sheets, etc. of generated data and passed these to client representatives after the event for processing.

The Lead Facilitator made sure, early in the planning stages, about the client's preference for managing the data in order to provide the appropriate space, technology and staff for the task.

8. Back-up and contingency plans

It can't be overemphasized how important these are for a large public participation event. Everything can go as planned or anything can go wrong or astray; we did experience unexpected problems or difficulties. One can't be too prepared and we learned to back up everything.

- Facility – possible issues were conflicts with users, noise, size of rooms or location, flood, electrical problems and other unexpected events
- Equipment – we always had lots of back-up equipment such as laptops, phones and additional capacity for copying, faxing, etc.
- Supplies – we consistently erred on the side of having too many flip charts, markers, pens, paper, tape and other supplies
- Personnel – we always had extra people on-site to step in, at the last minute, to facilitate or provide any other kind of support

The pre-planning elements are directly linked to the processes to be used at the event. Laying good groundwork for the event during the pre-planning stage contributes to the success of the event and makes for a more stress-free experience for everyone.

PART 3

PROCESS DESIGN AND PROGRAM SCHEDULE

Every public participation event is unique and has its own set of circumstances and variables. As we reflect on how our skill evolved in designing effective processes for public participation, we believe that there is both an "art" and a "science" to that action.

The "art" of process design comes from experience, intuition, creativity and interpretation of all the information gleaned during discussions with the client. It takes into consideration the values and guiding principles of the client to ensure satisfactory outcomes from the event without sacrificing the values held by the facilitating team and other GoA members. These values and guiding principles must be balanced by those brought to the event by the participants.

The "science" of process design lies in applying a methodology of clear thinking and decision-making, taking into account research and data on group dynamics, adult learning, public participation principles and techniques as well as the logistics within which the team will work.

Designing the Process

1. Working with a design team

Designing the process for the event was the most important part of the Lead Facilitator's job. Usually, the Lead Facilitator would pull together a team of staff, three of four people, to serve as a design team. Needless to say, much thought went into planning effective processes and a good flow to the activities of the event. We used many different tools in our processes and over the years our staff became very proficient in making the "work" part of the event seem effortless.

In determining what processes to use at any given public participation event, we learned to run through a series of questions. While this list isn't a template, we grew to rely on these questions to ensure that we had as much information as possible in order to design the most effective process for the best event results.

- What has triggered the event? Why is there a perceived need for the event and for public participation?
    - Is the interest in public participation genuine?
    - Will the client be open to the input provided?

- What are the desired outcomes for the event? What end product is desired?
    - What changes in the topic area do we expect as a result of the public participation event?
    - How will the participants be different? How will the client be different?

- What type of decision-making will result from the event?

  - Where will it be on the continuum of decision-making from voting to consensus?
  - If consensus is required, how will that be defined for this event?

- Who is accountable for the input?
  - Who will bear the accountability for the input and how it will be utilized?
  - How much commitment to the outcomes should the participants have?
  - What report-back procedure is required?

- What level of knowledge do the participants have about the content of the event?
  - Do we need to add an education component to the event?
  - When and how will that happen? e.g. pre-event mailings with information or a workbook; focus groups prior to the event; speakers and information at the event

- What circumstances does the client face at this time – internal/external issues, political issues, organizational hot spots, etc.?
  - What is the general environment like?
  - Are safeguards required in the process to guard the integrity of either the client or the participants?

- What logistics must be taken into account in designing the process?
  - Based on the size of the facility and the number of rooms, how many people will be in break-out groups?
  - How much time is available for the event and its elements?

- What level of controversy, if any, surrounds the topic area of the event?
  - How intense or emotional might discussions become?
  - Will time need to be allowed for participants to vent their emotions?

- What are the successes/struggles the client and/or participants have had in the topic area?
  - How will the process design build on the successes and avoid the struggles?

- At the event, what relationships need to occur? Between whom? Around what topics?
  - Will time need to be provided for relationship building?

- What obstacles and barriers may be encountered?

- How important is it to hear from everyone and for everyone to have adequate speaking time?
  - How large or small do discussion groups need to be?

- What is important for the client/observers/media to see?
  - How do you build transparency into the process while respecting the privacy or comfort level of participants?

2. Process notes

Once the process design had been finalized, the Lead Facilitator most often put together a thorough set of process notes for the facilitators. These notes contained details of the process, and once the agenda or program schedule was developed, also contained suggested timing. These process notes were invaluable to the staff and especially to any back-up staff who might have to step in to replace someone at the last minute.

3. Testing the process

It sometimes happened that there was time and the occasion to test the process before the event. Often this was done by the Lead Facilitator with client representatives. For example, an abbreviated mock run of the event schedule would take the client through the event processes. It helped both the Lead Facilitator and the client see how the process would work, finalize the time-frame for the parts of the event and reassure the client of what would actually be happening during the small group discussions.

The Event Program Schedule

We've learned how important a schedule or agenda for the event can be. In the full energy of a public participation event, it is often the one thread that connects all the many parts. It is certainly one of the main tools, at the event, of the Lead Facilitator.

An effective schedule must:

- ensure that there is a good flow to the activities of the event taking into account participants' learning and need for information as well as matching activities like listening to speakers or active discussion to the times of day when they are most suitable to the energy levels of the participants;
- provide a common framework from which participants can work;
- come in different versions: one for the client, one for the participants and a third, more detailed one, for the facilitators and other staff;
- be dated and/or numbered to ensure that everyone is working from the most current draft;
- provide for the most effective use of everyone's time to ensure that the client's and the participants' expectations are met and outcomes successfully achieved;
- provide adequate or appropriate time for all of the activities in the event such as speakers, small group discussions and work, meals, breaks, reporting and movement from activity to activity; and
- build in time for participants to relax, network and socialize.

Other factors which we have always found to be important considerations in setting the program schedule and designing the processes for the public participation events include:

1. Forming small groups for break-out discussions

While public participation events can call for plenary sessions only, in all of the large events in which we participated, small group break-out discussions were used. While the facility most often dictated the number of break-out groups possible as well as the number of people who could be accommodated in each room, we always tried to keep the small groups to about twelve to fifteen people with a twenty-person maximum. We liked the groups to be large enough to provide enough diversity of opinion but not so large as to limit each person's opportunity to speak.

Most often our clients were responsible for dividing the participant list into the small groups. Putting coloured dots, letters or numbers on individual name tags was the usual way of indicating to which group a person was assigned. We either worked with the client or strongly coached the staff to attempt to create a good cross-section, in each small group, of age, gender, geographic, ethnic or any other relevant demographic mix. Occasionally, it made sense for the small groups or perhaps a few of them only, to be homogenous by geography, by topic, or by affiliation.

Our Lead Facilitator always tried, as much as possible, to be alerted by the client if any participants were coming with "special" circumstances or interests. It was always important for our group facilitators to be aware of people who might have strong feelings about the topic, special agendas, or who might need to be especially encouraged to participate or to participate with and through others (e.g. persons who were deaf or blind).

In designing the process and building the schedule, we found it most helpful to build in time at the beginning of the first small group session to allow for introductions, housekeeping details, working principles and to begin to establish relationships and a comfort level amongst the participants and with their group facilitator. Likewise, we tried to make sure to allow time, at the end of the last group session, for the small groups to wind up and bring closure to their work together.

2. The use of speakers/presenters

Having speakers or presenters at a large public participation event is a nice enhancement. Getting the event off to a good start was critical to each of our events and so, much care was taken in making decisions about having speakers at the opening. This discussion with the client was always seen to be an important role for the Lead Facilitator because it is so vital that the speakers or presenters play a useful role at the event and aren't there just to fill time. Their message must clearly be aligned with the topic of the event.

Speakers or presenters may:

- set context for the event or individual parts of the event;
- provide an educational component or critical information; and/or
- provide thought-provoking ideas from a variety of viewpoints.

We learned, from experience, that speakers can help to make or break an event. Speakers or presenters need to know:

- what their role is in supporting or enhancing the event or a particular part of the event;
- how much time they have been allotted (and we found that presentations should not be more than one hour in length); and
- if there will be a question and answer period and how much time has been allotted for that.

3. Report-back process

We've learned that a sense of closure is necessary after the great expenditure of energy at a large public participation event. We also believe that a very good way to do that is with a plenary process at the end of the event to summarize and bring a sense of decision-making to the experience. Report-backs from small group discussions are a useful way to honour the work done by the participants and to validate that work by publicly acknowledging it. We learned the following about event-closing report-backs:

- most people's energy is waning by the end of the event and their tolerance for sitting and listening is diminished;
- participants want, however, to be reassured that the work they have done at the event will go somewhere and be useful in addressing the topic;
- report-backs are best done by the participants themselves but group facilitators must do some work in coaching and preparing the reporters and the material to be presented so that the report is succinct;
- the material presented at the report-back on behalf of each small group is best provided by a consensus of participants in the small groups;
- the entire report-back process shouldn't last more than one-half hour; and
- reducing boredom by changing the process can take a variety of forms.

4. Contingency plans for the process

Almost none of the events in which we participated went exactly as planned. Things change and as they do, the event is affected. Certainly, the more complicated the event and its processes, the more chance there is for something to impact its timely flow. The Lead Facilitator in our events (usually in consultation with the client) was most often the person who made the call when the process and/or agenda needed to flex to accommodate changes. Our Lead Facilitator learned to have contingency plans in mind.

Timing is often the area where adjustments had to be made:

- the process took longer in break-out groups than anticipated;
- a speaker took longer than was scheduled;
- one or two groups got bogged down for some reason and were behind;
- meals were slow; or
- weather affected the arrival or departure of participants or speakers;

We learned to plan in advance which parts of the process and/or program schedule could be shortened or modified without critically impacting the overall results of the event.

In addition to the participants, the program schedule, the process design as well as highly skilled facilitators form the backbone of the public participation event. The strength of these components together provides the best opportunity for a successful experience for participants and useful outcomes for the client. With strong pre-planning, management of time and process as well as a good set of contingency plans, little can get in the way of achieving all of the event goals.

PART 4

THE FACILITATION TEAM

> *We learned that the Lead Facilitator should not facilitate during the event. He/she relied on and supported a strong team of skilled and competent facilitator*

The success of a large public participation event is dependent upon a number of factors. An effective facilitation team is one of the most critical of these. Our Branch benefits from a sizeable, very strong component of staff who are well-trained facilitators. Nevertheless, we continued to learn lessons in our work over the years about how to maximize the skills on our team to produce the most effective outcomes at the events in which we participated.

The Lead Facilitator of each public participation event has always tried to identify the facilitation team as early as possible in the planning stages. The number of facilitators required was a factor of:

- the number of participants expected;
- the number of small groups; and
- the facilitation process to be used.

We learned that a strong sense of team was important for the success of the event. Good communication and support mechanisms right from the formation of the team through to the end of the project established the best teams.

There are significant benefits of establishing a well-functioning team:

- the staff become fully accountable and committed, through the Lead Facilitator, to the client and to the process;
- this loyalty to the Lead Facilitator and the client assists facilitators to stay on course with the planned process and intended outcomes; and
- on occasion, facilitators will experience pressures from participants, individually or in groups, to deviate from the designated process and/or expected outcomes to satisfy their own needs and agendas. Facilitators will remember their accountability while at the same time being sensitive to the dynamics within their small groups.

Ultimately, our facilitation teams were successful because of a good level of trust that developed between the facilitators, other staff and the Lead Facilitator of each event. The staff knew to trust the Lead Facilitator's decisions with the client and the process and, in turn, the Lead Facilitator trusted the team, because of their experience and credentials, to be able to get the job done in a way that was successful for everyone.

Here's what we learned to look for in a good facilitation team:

- good speaking, listening and group observation skills;
- a good sense of humour and the ability to remain on an even keel emotionally throughout the facilitation;
- a professional attitude based on the GoA values of respect, accountability, integrity and excellence;
- an ability to act with diplomacy and tact;
- some knowledge of the topic area – this can be beneficial in the following ways:
  - to enable the facilitator to more easily keep the group focused on the main topics;
  - to help the group stay on topic; and
  - to enable the facilitator to understand the language or jargon used by stakeholders;
- the ability to take a neutral position in regards to the content of the event – the participants are more open to the process when they perceive that the facilitator is not representing a position;
- a strong sense of team with a loyalty to the Lead Facilitator and the design team; and
- strong technical and process skills.

Each of the many events in which we participated required a unique staffing configuration. Some required two facilitators in each small group; some needed only one. Sometimes we used an official recorder to keep notes in each group but, often, the facilitators took the notes. Occasionally, we needed a large administrative and technical component of staff for the development of reports on-site. We always tried to have some back-up staff available in the event that someone, at the last minute or on-site, had to back out.

Assistant Lead Facilitators

We learned that it was best for the Lead Facilitator NOT to facilitate during the event. This allowed the Lead to be free to observe, trouble-shoot and communicate with the client representatives and the facilitators. At most events, we staffed Assistant Lead Facilitators to support the Lead Facilitator. In large venues with so many people, the Lead Facilitator and Assistants really kept all of the groups connected and the whole process flowing at a consistent pace.

The role of the Assistant Lead Facilitator was to act as an intermediary between the Lead and the small group facilitators. Every effort was made to keep the flow of the work in the small groups as trouble-free as possible and to have all the groups moving together fairly consistently. The role of the Assistant Lead Facilitators might include:

- seeing to the health and safety of the facilitators;
- acting as a communication link between the Lead and the other facilitators;
- dealing with difficult situations or dealing with participants requiring special attention, often, by providing alternative means of input for individual participants, on a one-to-one basis, who were experiencing difficulties and/or issues in the small group discussion rooms;
- arranging for support or resolving faulty IT issues;
- monitoring the rooms and providing feedback to the Lead Facilitator with regard to how well the process was progressing, and unobtrusively, providing timing and other feedback information to the room facilitators;
- at times, providing an overview summary collection of key points to the Lead Facilitator and/or other client representative reports at the final plenary session;
- message delivery of new or emergency information to the facilitators; and/or
- stepping in for a facilitator who might fall ill at the last minute.

Training and Orienting the Facilitation Team and Other Staff

The more information that could be provided to the facilitation team and other staff for each event the better and the sooner the better. We always liked to give staff as much time as possible to get comfortable with all of the component parts of the event. For very large and especially high profile events our Lead Facilitator provided staff with a package of information containing such things as:

- key contacts – client and other project contacts;
- a staff list and contact information;
- participant lists if available (divided into small groups too, if possible);
- facility information – address, street maps, facility layout maps;
- event agendas;
- process and facilitation notes including forms and templates for reporting, if applicable;
- any information packages for participants – workbooks, discussion guides, etc.;
- news releases – any pre-event publicity;
- etc.

In ideal situations, our Lead Facilitator held a staff orientation meeting one or more days prior to the event. We have always tried to take into account the time required for staff to adequately prepare mentally for the event and to become very comfortable with the process and the flow of the program and time-frames.

A typical orientation meeting might consist of:

- a review of package materials;
- a clear statement and explanation of expected outcomes – facilitators need to understand their role in delivering the expected product to the client both in terms of process and content;
- the roles of all players:
    - a good chance for people who might not know each other to become familiar with each other;
    - knowing and understanding the roles of all the people involved including, security staff, media and observers;
    - distribution of important contact information, especially cell phone numbers of the Lead Facilitator, the Assistant Lead Facilitators, security personnel, facility staff, IT staff, etc.;
- review of working values for the team – for us, these spoke to the importance of:
    - good communication among team members;
    - loyalty and commitment to the Lead, other members of the team and the process;
    - equity in sharing the workload in the facilitation room;
    - professionalism at all times; and
    - flexibility and understanding;
- detailed review and discussion of all event processes and the program schedule:
    - Our Lead Facilitator always indicated at this time how changes to the process would be dealt with and what the "outside" parameters were in terms of permitting changes to happen.
    - We always made every attempt to be very consistent about what would be happening in each small group in order to provide the best overall results for the client and the participants.
    - Sometimes it was possible to provide the facilitators with a "tip sheet"– enhanced and extra notes on process details with hints, tips, advice, etc. These were always helpful.
- review of technical support and data management;
- logistical details – accommodation, meals, travel, expenses, etc.;
- tour of the facility (if possible); and
- review (and sometimes distribution) of supplies and equipment.

Trust was the key factor for the team to ensure success at any large public participation event. When everyone went into any event knowing that all the details had been well thought out and planned, all contingencies were in place and the team trusted each other, the Lead Facilitator and the process, all went very well.

PART 5

THE EVENT

From the start to the finish of a large public participation event, the Lead Facilitator is the busiest person there. The Lead is involved from pre-event, on-site preparations and coordinating the smooth running of the overall event through to the evaluation of the facilitation process once it's all over.

On-site Before the Event

We didn't always have a perfect set-up in our facilities. It seemed, often, that at arrival our Lead Facilitator would find that there were some issues that needed quick resolution. We learned, therefore, not to take the pre-planning for granted and that the Lead Facilitator and other staff, if possible, should arrive at the event venue well before its commencement, or even the day before, for a last minute tour. We often modified seating arrangements or small room set-ups during this time. Our facilitators also appreciated the luxury, if possible, of being able to set up the small rooms well in advance allowing for a more relaxed start to the event itself.

If the facilitator orientation meeting occurred much before the event, our Lead Facilitator always met again briefly with staff just prior to the commencement of the event to cover any last minute changes or to provide updates.

The Opening of the Event

All of the events we refer to in this document were clearly owned and run by a Government of Alberta ministry or other entity. Therefore, our client was always in charge of opening and closing the event. It was important that accountabilities be set, from the beginning through to the end of the event, between the client and the participants.

We encouraged the client to open with remarks which might include:

- the reason the event was being held;
- the intended outcomes;
- why the participants had been invited;
- how the input from the event would be utilized;
- how the client would communicate back to the participants after the event;
- if and how the data generated at the event would be made available to the participants; and
- an introduction of the Lead Facilitator with mention of the facilitation team.

We were in charge of the process of the event and soon after the client representatives opened the program, our Lead Facilitator authoritatively stepped in to begin the event process.

The Lead Facilitator's opening remarks were very important in setting the stage for the event and putting it in context for the participants. His/her messages had to be clearly linked to the opening comments made by the client. We learned that it was very important to carefully script the opening by the Lead Facilitator. These comments included:

- an overview of the agenda with an emphasis on time-frames;
- clarification of the processes to be used for obtaining participant input – what will be asked and how the input will be utilized;
- a description of the report-back processes and encouragement to participants to attend;
- an outline of the roles of all in attendance including the participants themselves, the facilitators, any observers, the media, the client representatives and any other individuals involved in the event;
- an introduction to any speakers and/or presenters; and
- after the opening speakers/presenters, the adjourning of the opening plenary and the dispatching of participants to small groups, if that was part of the process.

In Small Groups

1. Opening

Our Lead Facilitators, in designing the program schedule and processes, tried their best to allow enough time in the small groups, for the group facilitators and the participants to have 10 or 15 minutes to get comfortable with each other and the tasks before them. The group facilitators opened these introductory sessions with such things as:

- introductions allowing each participant a few minutes to say a few things about him/herself such as:
    - name;
    - home location;
    - connection to the topic of the event;
    - brief comments, if any, about the topic;
        - we learned that allowing this brief venting seemed to alleviate some of the possible tensions in the room – people often came to events with strong emotions;
        - it required skill on the part of the facilitators not to let this venting go too long;
- a quick look at a detailed agenda for the processes in the small group (we usually had this on paper up on a wall somewhere in the room);
- a quick overview of any group values, ground rules and/or guiding principles for the work about to take place in the room; and
- any housekeeping details such as the location of restrooms, phones, etc.

2. During the event

The Lead Facilitator and Assistant Lead Facilitators circulated, during the event, from room to room, observing, noting the progress in each room and troubleshooting, if necessary.

On a few occasions, the Lead Facilitator would convene a brief meeting, during a break, with facilitators, to address any emergent issues, such as significant time issues, challenges and/or opportunities in any of the small groups or with particular individual or special interest groups. Only rarely, did we have to make significant changes to the process and/or agenda. Sometimes bad weather caused us to abbreviate the agenda, cutting out sections of process which, we hoped, wouldn't compromise the expected outcomes. These major decisions were always made by the Lead Facilitator and the client.

3. Closing

At the end of small group sessions, we liked to manage the time in such a way that there was enough time, about ten to fifteen minutes, to accomplish some closing tasks in the small groups before the closing plenary. These closing tasks included:

- taking the participants through a very short debrief of their work and time together;
    - this took many forms but the essential part was just allowing the participants to bring some closure to the day through some kind of summative reflection; and
- preparing for the report-back session, if there was to be one;
    - ideally working with the group to choose their key points for sharing at the plenary, and
    - helping the person making the report (unless, of course, that is the facilitator)

Closing the Event

The Lead Facilitator always convened any report-back process at a plenary session which normally occurred at the end of the event. We made every attempt to keep this session to a maximum of half-an-hour.

After report-backs, the Lead Facilitator closed the process part of the event with:

- thanks to the participants for their cooperation with the rigours of the process and the timelines;
- thanks to the facilitators and other staff;
- thanks to the client for the opportunity of being a part of the event; and
- an invitation and encouragement to participants to fill out any evaluation forms and hand them in before leaving.

The client representatives always closed the event with their thanks and, often, a reiteration of some of the opening remarks about how they would utilize the input and how they would communicate those results with the participants.

PART 6

CLOSURE

All the events in which we participated ended on a high note. The experience of having so many people together in one place addressing one topic or issue is, in itself, a wonderful thing. To deliver a process that connects people around that topic, bringing them closer to understanding it and even solving it, is exhilarating. Knowing that, together, you may have done something to improve the community, a group of people or even one life is unspeakably satisfying. People involved in our events left tired but enlightened, having encountered new people, new ideas and, perhaps, new motivations. As staff, we always felt the "world move a little" and we felt fulfilled knowing that we had stretched people, with our processes, to contemplate, through the exploration of the topic, a better place and better circumstances.

> *Knowing that, together, you may have done something to improve the community, a group of people or even one life is unspeakably satisfying.*

We always hoped and grew to know, that the work at these public participation events would make a difference. And they did. We saw, with time, new government policies enacted; new resources become available; new programs appear; new community initiatives take shape. Public input is a norm in Alberta and it works.

For the Facilitation Team

Whenever possible, we tried to hold a debrief session for the facilitation team and other staff at the conclusion of the event. This session, however brief, was an opportunity for:

- client representatives to make final remarks to the staff and say their thanks;
- emotional closure for the staff stemming from what is often a very intense and sometimes, a stressful, working environment;
- the staff to assess the effectiveness of the process delivered;
- a chance to reflect on the entire context of the event experience; and
- celebration.

The intent of the debriefing was to gather insights and feedback from the event in order to promote learning, mostly our own as a team. Even if the time available for the session was short, it was seen to be important in order to allow the facilitators the opportunity to share their thoughts on the spot; waiting for a follow-up meeting days or weeks later was to risk losing thoughts, feelings, insights and experiences.

For the Client

As mentioned, client representatives often participated in the staff debrief. Frequently, a separate meeting with the client, to debrief the event, happened on-site after the event. Sometimes that meeting included all staff but on occasion the meeting was between the client and the Lead Facilitator only. The main purpose of this debrief with the client was to capture immediate feedback and evaluative thoughts from the client. Further follow-up meetings with the client in the days and weeks following the event, were usual. These meetings included a more detailed evaluation of the event including a review of the participant feedback if there had been any (such as evaluation forms), discussing the Branch performance, and, sometimes, helping the client decide and plan next steps in working with the public input.

For the Lead Facilitator

All of the data collected through the input process was the property of the client and had to be delivered in some form as soon as possible after the event. The data might be actual flip charts, cards and other materials used during the event. Or, the information might be available electronically from note takers transcribing input onto computers during the sessions. These kinds of materials were usually handed over to the client right at the event site immediately after the closing. More often, however, the facilitators were responsible, over the days or, at most, two weeks following the event, for transcribing their charts, cards and other materials and submitting this material to the Lead Facilitator. In whatever form the client wanted it, the input from the event was reviewed by the Lead Facilitator and delivered to the client. We learned, with time, not to attempt to process input on-site for delivery to participants before the closing of the event.

Once the input had been transcribed into deliverable copy, the Lead Facilitator, after reviewing the material, could also evaluate the process that had been used for the event. This was done with any staff who had helped with the design or had any input into the process development. With respect to the outcomes of the event and the input provided by the participants, the Lead Facilitator's responsibility was to determine if the processes used matched the client expectations and produced the contracted deliverables.

Our staff all learned a great deal from our experiences facilitating public input. The evaluation processes after each event helped us build our skills in designing effective processes and running successful events for our clients. We have never underestimated the value of a post-event evaluation.

Here are some examples of questions the Lead Facilitator might use to do that evaluation.

- Is the material gathered from the participants written in a consistent manner that ensures clear understanding and relates to the intended output of the event?
- Was the process effective in achieving the intended outputs?
- What factors, if any affected the ability of the groups to provide desired results?
- What have we learned?

****

As the years have passed, the ways of gathering public input have changed. New technologies certainly offer new opportunities. People in our communities have more access to information these days. However, people still have the same commitment to addressing community issues and still want to share their thoughts and ideas, face-to-face with others who also care about those issues. We are happy to be able to continue facilitating that need to address and resolve community issues through public input. We continue to learn and change our methods, but the fundamental principles described here still form the solid foundation on which we plan and deliver large public input events. These principles are based on respect and trust for the client, the participants and our colleagues.

Good communication, effective process design and delivery skills, genuine interest and a belief in allowing people to have a say in decisions that impact their lives will always be at the core of genuine public participation.