

Transcript

Matters of Engagement podcast

Episode: "The Business and Politics of Engagement, with John Perenack of StrategyCorp"

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SPEAKERS

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Jennifer 00:02

You're listening to Matters of Engagement, a podcast examining issues at the intersection of health, health care and society. I'm Jennifer Johannesen.

Emily 00:12

And I'm Emily Nicholas Angl.

Jennifer 00:16

In this episode, we're featuring our conversation with John Perenack. He's a Principal at StrategyCorp, a strategic consulting firm based in Toronto and Ottawa, with clients across Canada. John is a communications specialist who often supports clients in developing public and stakeholder engagement strategies and activities.

Emily 00:36

The firm's clients come from a wide range of industries, but they have a substantial portfolio in the healthcare sector. So this includes hospitals, health care organizations, and other interests related to health services. They're also experts in government relations. So they advise on things like regulatory and policy considerations. But also what's called "small p" politics, where it's important to account for factors like power, influence, relationships, shifting social and cultural tides - all aspects of politics and government that clients might not be attuned to.

Jennifer 01:14

This is a slight departure for us. We usually speak with people working more directly in healthcare, or who research health and health care. But I've actually known John for several years. I provide technical services to StrategyCorp. And we've worked together on a number of projects. We've talked occasionally about engagement, and I knew he'd be an interesting guest.

Emily 01:36

We also usually focus on high-level rationales for engagement. But we haven't really got into some of the nuts and bolts, like the fact that there's a whole fee-for-service industry out there: agencies hired to support engagement strategy and activities.

Jennifer 01:52

Right, so we were interested in a kind of behind-the-scenes look at what engagement for hire looks like. What is the work that's involved? And how does a firm like StrategyCorp advise on or think about engagement? And I was especially curious to know from John if some of the things that we think about are also things that he thinks about. Like, is any of this actually useful or meaningful? Does it sometimes feel on his end like it's just a checkbox exercise?

Emily 02:22

Yeah, and he had some interesting observations and definitely understands the critique. He even shares a lot of it, having seen engagement play out in many different ways.

Jennifer 02:33

Okay, so just to be clear on the scope of what we're talking about: clients often hire StrategyCorp when they need support with something that requires expertise in communications, or government relations or management consulting. And that something could be like, for example, a land development project, where the client wants to repurpose a building, say convert a former church into condos. And that can be a delicate matter when it comes to community relations, as well as considerations of zoning issues and a host of other things. An example related to health care, and we'll hear John talk about this, is managing the activities and communications around finding a location for a new hospital.

Emily 03:14

Clients might also need support to manage a tricky public relations issue. Or maybe a client wants to embark on a project that will need to show it has public support before they can move forward from a financial or political perspective. We talk about that too, in terms of managing community and stakeholder relationships.

Jennifer 03:34

Yes, so it's the business end of engagement, where engagement is part of an organization or company's process to accomplish something specific. And honestly, it was kind of refreshing to talk about it in such clear transactional terms. Previously, we've heard a lot about the virtues of engagement. And the strategic value of engagement often goes unstated, or is even hidden.

Emily 03:59

I think this really helps with our overall understanding about public engagement and health policy. I mean, how people experience and access health care is not just influenced by policymakers or academics and politicians. It's also shaped by a whole other layer of our economy: private consultants, agencies, lobbyists... I mean, they all potentially impact health policy in one way or another.

Jennifer 04:24

Okay, so let's get to our conversation. Here's John.

John P 04:31

So I'm a Principal at a firm called StrategyCorp. And we do really three things. We do strategic communications, government relations and management consulting. And the thing that makes us a bit different, and what brought us into the engagement space was... it's the place, in my mind, where the political and the general communications intersect. Because oftentimes, what's happening is an organization - if they don't have a statutory obligation to consult or engage - oftentimes, they need to do it in order to move a project forward, or move a process forward. And so engagement is a critical component of that.

Emily 05:12

John noted that engagement is "where the political and the general communications intersect." I think it's a characterization that's fairly specific to the field of communications.

Jennifer 05:23

Yeah, and it's consistent with what we just mentioned in the intro. There's often a focus on a moral or democratic imperative to engage. You know, the virtues of engagement. But this description calls more attention to the strategic value.

Emily 05:36

Right. But that doesn't mean that it's always about optics or public relations. John thinks there's potential for engagement to be done better across the board, to improve engagement experiences and outcomes.

Jennifer 05:50

And there are actually many firms doing this kind of work. And the way they each approach engagement varies.

John P 05:56

I find there's an interesting tension out there, and in the industry of firms that do this, between those that come at it from a, I'm going to say, academic standpoint - where they talk about, oh, you know, "based on scholarly research, these are the best ways to engage people." Versus a more pragmatic approach. Which is if you're trying to move a project forward - the stakeholder interests and what the people who are in the process think, and what motivates them, really understanding the "small p" politics of that is really critical to structuring an engagement process that will feel meaningful. And so we're trying to stitch those two together with the work we do.

Emily 06:40

John continued with describing different approaches to engagement. These aren't just differences between firms. Sometimes these are conversations he also has to have with clients, to encourage them to think beyond the usual kinds of communications activities.

John P 06:55

There's definitely this perspective out there that when it comes to engaging your stakeholders, public at large, you have to make engagement like really super simple, because people aren't going to understand the concepts. And so it devolves into some of these box checking exercises, or some of these engagement tactics that are more performative, where it's meant to be kind of just a spectacle of engagement that you can take pictures of and promote. I think there's a real problem with that. I think people are capable of engaging at a higher level, and it's kind of selling them short to say, "Oh, we have to give them a three question or a five question survey." Because they're not going to be able to get into the detail of this in order to provide meaningful feedback.

John P 07:53

If you do take a more robust approach to actually explaining to people what you're wanting to get their feedback on, bringing them through a bit more of a detailed process and getting meaningful feedback so that you can correct what you're doing, or show how feedback they're providing... is it making any meaningful change to the plans that you're planning anyway? [This] is the place where you want to be because that builds you the stronger relationships, and then people feel more invested in the process, and as a result it has a greater likelihood of success.

Jennifer 08:15

John has seen a lot of change over the years in terms of what counts as engagement.

John P 08:20

In the past, the idea was that engagement was step 7A of the checklist you needed to go through. And we'll just keep it simple. And we'll do things like we'll have a telephone town hall meeting... I think

they're a useful communications exercise from time to time, but I don't really see them as a forum where any real meaningful engagement happens. But it looks great, because you'll say, "Oh, I called 20,000 people. And I got 5000 of them on the phone for 20 minutes. And we talked to them." And so from a public relations standpoint, there was a feeling where we just do the things that will look really good. And that will be our engagement. But I think that there is a significant change happening, it feels like it is anyway. Especially because when you do see the Ministry of Health pushing back and saying "no, we want to see more than that," that will help set the stage for more robust engagement approaches.

Emily 09:19

John talked about how there's now higher expectations by the Ministry of Health to show more substantial engagement than simply doing a survey or talking at people in a scripted presentation. And since they're often funding or supporting major healthcare development projects, there's fiscal or financial incentive to go beyond the basics. But John also makes an argument that more robust engagement is a good strategy for relationship building.

John P 09:46

So going beyond the minimum is always a good strategy. Not every client is comfortable with doing that. Many are feeling still like "oh, well, we've always done it this way before. So you don't really want to go further than that." But I think there's an increasing number of them who see the benefit of going beyond that and see the benefit of using an engagement process as a stakeholder relationship development process. And ideally, those organizations should be looking at this in terms of engagement being not some sort of interstitial thing where you're doing it every four years, but rather a process that's ongoing. And it may have periods when it accelerates, or the engagement activities are at a stronger pace because you have something particular going on that you need greater amounts of feedback into. But it should be a continuous process with your stakeholders. We try work with clients to structure their processes that way, so that they're able to maintain an ongoing cadence of engagement beyond the immediate need they may have, because it's a capital plan or something like that.

Emily 10:51

Yeah, we heard this phrase a lot: "relationship-building with stakeholders". It was something we kept returning to and felt like a concept that was a bit hard to pin down. I mean, I guess it's because we don't really talk about relationships in this way, in our usual conversations about patient engagement. We tend to talk more about collaboration, and maybe shared decision-making. Something that evokes more of a partnership.

Jennifer 11:15

Yeah, and I wonder if it makes more sense in this context if we think of it like how brands build relationships with customers. It's maybe a way of describing how visible and recognizable you are, how responsive you are, and whether you have access to people whose opinions matter to you. And on the customer side, it's about credibility and trust, and whether people will actually listen when you have something to say.

Emily 11:41

Yeah, I think so. You know, but stakeholders here aren't really customers in that sense...

Jennifer 11:47

No, no, for sure. They're people or communities who have a stake. That's why they're called stakeholders! They care about what happens or are in some way affected by whatever the actions or outcomes are. I mean, I guess the analogy isn't perfect, but it maybe highlights that this kind of engagement-for-hire has a different sort of motive than, say, patient engagement programs in a hospital.

Emily 12:10

Okay, well, we asked about stakeholders. Who are they, and how are they defined? It varies, of course, and John explained using an example of a project related to hospital development.

John P 12:23

When it comes to healthcare engagement projects, what we typically try and do is look at all the stakeholders that are in and around interacting with the hospital. And there tends to be three categories of them. The first, it's fairly straightforward, it's the broad public. And so you're going to be looking at them, that stakeholder audience, to decide what's the best way of reaching out to the broader public to understand how to get their perspectives.

John P 12:49

The second are large organizations with strong, important relationships with the hospital or healthcare organization that you probably want to talk to on a one-on-one basis or have focus groups with. And so you often organize them into the kinds of care they provide or service they provide in partnership with the hospital. So you know: home care, long term care, care to specific subpopulations in the community, whether they be by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation - based on whether there's meaningful differences in the way that services are provided.

John P 13:27

There's also the third category, which is groups that are really hard to reach. And so they may be groups like people experiencing homelessness. And so what we try and do is we identify all the stakeholders first, and then we use tactics to try and draw out those voices. Or we create engagement processes. What we're trying to do is not drag people into engagement. We're trying to take the engagement to them. So we're going to choose tactics that match those stakeholders in the way they typically communicate or what's convenient for them. And for that third category, because often they're difficult to talk to directly, what we try and do is you try and find organizations that serve those communities and use those organizations - conduct a proxy kind of engagement with them - to get their feedback.

Jennifer 14:14

So let's leave aside the term hard to reach for the moment. We spent lots of time in other episodes talking about that. But maybe let's reframe it as: groups who probably have good reason to be especially distrustful. In that respect, I think John's right in thinking it probably wouldn't be a good approach for some populations to like, poll people on the street or bring one or two people into focus groups.

Emily 14:40

Yeah, I think there would still be questions about which organizations we're talking about, and whether the community members themselves feel represented by those organizations... but that's another matter. In principle, it sounds like this proxy idea is maybe a good approach.

Jennifer 14:58

Okay. We asked if any of these sets of stakeholders take priority over others.

John P 15:04

With those three approaches, we find that it's not so much deciding who gets precedence, but it's deciding: given the resources available for any given exercise, how can we use the mix of those tactics across those three approaches as efficiently as possible to make sure we can get the feedback or input from those groups as best we can.

Jennifer 15:29

Okay, so the discussion so far was based on the example of finding a location for a new hospital. And we do think this is related to health policy, because it's a fiscal decision using taxpayer dollars impacting a very large number of people. And it has implications for the way care is delivered and experienced.

Emily 15:49

Right. But this kind of land development decision is, of course, different from what we would normally call "hospital policies," which might include things like Codes of Conduct or Visitor Policies, things like that. We asked John about how it works for these kinds of internal policy decisions.

John P 16:07

So in the policy realm, I think what happens is, organizations rely on what's existing already and convenient. So for example, hospitals quite often have Patient and Family Experience Councils where they will use them as a sounding board or use them as a resource for input. But I think what happens is oftentimes, they will go there with some well-thought out, well-advanced concepts - versus starting with the more exploratory, earlier in the policy development phase. That's typically what I see.

Jennifer 16:44

Well, I think John just summarized at least five of our episodes in about four sentences!

Emily 16:51

Okay, so now that stakeholders have been identified... what's next? John gave another example of how engagement gets rolled out.

John P 17:00

One of the things we like doing what we're undertaking an engagement process [fades]

Jennifer 17:04

Actually, let's forward a bit through this part, because I think what John describes here will likely be familiar to listeners. They basically assess each stakeholder group, breaking them down into smaller demographics as needed groups. Then they figure out which approaches or tactics to use, keeping in mind accessibility and community preferences. And where appropriate, they'll do small focus groups, and sometimes use social media platforms like Instagram to elicit feedback.

Emily 17:32

That's what they typically do. There are also things that they try to avoid.

John P 17:38

There's a whole school of engagement activities, where it's more performative. You know, they set up something at a local market on a Saturday, and they invite people over to draw "what healthcare means to them and the community" on a picture. And I don't know. My view is I don't think it's terribly meaningful. It may look good, but for the effort that you're expending to undertake that tactic, you probably could reach five more groups and talk to them directly. And that's a better, more meaningful

type of engagement. But that's just not everyone's view. I'm trying to change it one at a time. But that's just not everyone's view right now.

Emily 18:18

John referred to engagement being meaningful a few times. We asked him to break it down. How does he define meaningful?

John P 18:27

There's maybe two tests to being is it meaningful. The first test is: is the engagement being done in a way that is at all sensitive or thoughtful of the attributes or circumstances of the audience you're trying to talk to? The other test is that implementation part, right? Like, how much of that feedback is going to be either incorporated, or a rationale provided for why it's not achievable or not on the cards. Sometimes that may be it just doesn't work, or it could be like, not right now.

Whatever the case may be, though, that's the other test to it. And, as a provider, we can control the first half, that first test, and it's the ultimate organization that really controls the second test.

John P 19:14

One of the things too is that it can be a very subjective thing, because depending on the organization, they may think they're being very responsive. And that's a genuine belief of theirs. But an outside observer might look at it as you guys have, and in many of the discussions you've had, and say, well, not really, it doesn't appear like that's like it is. And I just think that every organization is going to be different that way, because they're all going to be coming from different levels of experience and perspectives.

Jennifer 19:42

So there are two parts to being meaningful. The engagement activity itself should be appropriate and relevant to the group you're engaging. And then you actually have to use the feedback or input you get. Now this makes sense if you think about engagement from the client end of things. I just not sure this would be sufficient, though, from the stakeholders' perspective. At least in the patient engagement space, people want more of a sense of partnership, not just a forum to be heard.

Emily 20:12

Yes. Which might explain what John was saying that there can be an earnest belief that you're doing it right. But not everyone agrees it's right. Or is sufficient.

Jennifer 20:24

Right. And as we talked a bit more, John elaborated on the importance of two-way communication and dialogue.

John P 20:30

Stakeholders are always right. And so what you're doing is you're really just listening to their viewpoints and trying to elicit, trying to understand where they're coming from and what their thoughts are. I find that there's often where things break down - an organization hasn't done enough ongoing engagement with a set of stakeholders, so that they feel like they're part of an ongoing process or part of an ongoing dialogue with the organization. And so that's where you get into a really sort of sawtooth approach. There's some engagement, then disconnected for a while and there's more engagement, then disconnect for a while. And the piece that goes along with that is this absence of a two-way party engagement. Like it's great to get their feedback, but you then need to follow that up in some respect, to communicate to them how their feedback was used, or give them the final product so they can see where... or where their feedback didn't get captured. Not all feedback is possible to be included, right? Like some things are at odds with what other groups want and some things just aren't possible to do. So ultimately, the organization has to make decisions. But regardless, you have to communicate back to allow people to feel like they're part of that process.

John P 21:49

And that to me, that's the big thing that's often missed. It's the communications component to engagement. It's "we're going out to listen, but we're also going to tell people something afterwards." That communications piece is often either not done or overlooked. And so I think that's where you get a situation where you get those unsatisfied stakeholders.

Emily 22:11

You know...we spend so much time picking apart language. And I think if we were talking about patient engagement in the kind of quality improvement context or research partnership context that we've talked about before? There'd be lots here to think through. I mean, maybe there still is. But we have to remember that the business context changes things. StrategyCorp is a for-profit business, and they perform work on behalf of their clients. The incentive, at least for StrategyCorp is different than it would be for a hospital or any of their clients.

Jennifer 22:44

Yeah. I mean, having good relationships is always a good idea no matter how you look at it. But in the end their clients have specific goals, priorities and desired outcomes. And those might not be shared by the people they're engaging. So it can be a balancing act, which requires particular expertise.

Emily 23:06

As we talked further about building relationships, we ended up talking a lot about feelings. Our contention has long been that feelings are too often a barometer for engagement. That if we focus on whether people feel good about engaging? It can obfuscate whether the engagement was at all productive. So we asked John about that: what is the value of focusing on feelings?

John P 23:29

As a consultant, I don't feel we're successful unless we're leaving the client in a better place than when we got there. And so the feelings of the stakeholders and how they feel about the process and how they feel like they're going to be part of engagement in the future is really important. So that question of feelings is tied to the kind of relationship we have. And in order to have a relationship, that means we actually have to be either talking to you or asking you about stuff and just having a dialogue of some sort, at a mutually understood cadence. And what was often missing in the past is, it was no engagement. And then, "oh, we have a big need. So we're going to go out and talk to you." And then there was no engagement again. And so that idea of a mutually understood cadence didn't exist because it was just... the organization just decided when it needed to reach out to people. And that's not the basis on which you can build any relationship. And so, to the point about feelings - people feel that they would... feel like just disconnected... are oftentimes really skeptical. Because it's like, "oh, you want my opinion now? Where have you been for the last three years?"

Jennifer 24:45

Well, this is a point we've thought a lot about whether evaluating feelings is a good way to evaluate whether an engagement was successful. And my feelings on that are... mixed.

Emily 24:57

Yeah, but John makes a good point. I guess it's hard to separate out. Feelings are a reflection of the relationship and vice versa. So if the objective is to have some kind of relationship where there's ongoing dialogue and mutual agreements - well, of course, feelings will factor into it.

Jennifer 25:15

Yeah, that's fair. But we've also seen where warm, fuzzy feelings seem to be all that matters. And that's a problem if the people being engaged think their contributions deserve to be more impactful than that. And we said so to John. Even the more in-depth kinds of events, more than just drawing pictures in the park? Well, even those can ultimately just be a kind of box-checking exercise.

Emily 25:40

Yeah, you know, John acknowledged that those kinds of things certainly do happen. But he's not so quick to dismiss them out of hand. Even if activities may not be considered proper engagement, they may still have value for the client.

John P 25:55

So it depends on what your objectives are. If your objectives are to have a have a public relations opportunity, where you're having the organization be visible in the community, then that's the kind of thing you just talked about. The kind of engagement activity... well, we won't call it engagement... that kind of activity - it would be entirely appropriate and probably successful because people are seeing you, people are participating. And from public relations standpoint, you can achieve the things you want. If it's truly an engagement exercise that you're trying to undertake, where you're getting feedback from people that will be used to help drive a decision or provide input into a strategy you're developing? Not so sure that's the right way of going about it.

Jennifer 26:45

I'm glad John brought up objectives here. We're used to engagement being kind of the stated end-point, and not a means to an end. So he asked John if his clients typically even know what their objectives are at the beginning, when they first hired StrategyCorp.

John P 27:01

The first question we often ask is, what does success look like for you? Because I think that helps people to start unpacking what are they actually trying to accomplish. And once you can get people thinking about the end product, then it helps people decide whether the tactics that are maybe being thought about are going to be sufficient to deliver that end product. If you just start talking about tactics on their own, it's pretty hard to distinguish one from the other. But if you start from that standpoint of "Okay, so what are we really trying to achieve here? What does that look like?" And that's where the political often comes in. Because there's often going to be a level of oversight or some sort of review that happens. And as a result, it helps focus people's thinking.

Emily 27:52

We ask John a bit more about clients and their objectives. What specifically do they hire StrategyCorp to do?

John P 28:00

It ranges from organizations that have a need - they're doing a capital plan, or they're trying to find a location for a new hospital. And so they need to undertake public engagement as part and parcel of that activity. So those are fairly straightforward. But there's a nuance there too, because, yeah, we're

trying to find a location for a hospital... but there's also a million different other stakeholder considerations to take into account. You know, every local politician wants a new hospital in their area. And they all can't have it in their areas! Only one place to put it. There are environmental considerations. There are First Nations considerations. There are existing infrastructure considerations - like you can't put the new hospital next to the old hospital unless you plan to get rid of the old hospital. There's a lot of nuance to get to. And so that's why sort of tackling the question that way is important. Other stakeholders, other organizations, what they're looking to do is they're trying to actually use the engagement process to strengthen relationships with stakeholders - they know that they may have a problem with stakeholders, and so they want to mend some fences and use it as a catalyst to build some better relationships going forward. So really, it runs the gamut of what people are trying to achieve.

Jennifer 29:20

So there's obviously overlap in terms of approach. But when it comes to motives or intention, there is a distinction between consultation - seeking public input - and repairing or building relations with a particular community, where failing to do so may interfere with the success of a project. And I guess this is where it's really important to match the tactics to the objectives.

Emily 29:43

Mm-hm. Although, in the case of finding a hospital location, I imagine it's a blend of both. So many different stakeholders and interests. It'd be hard not to exclude or offend someone. Which means it's especially important to manage expectations of the public. If you're going to ask them to complete a survey, how much impact is that likely to have?

John P 30:04

You probably would never ask a question like, "Oh, where do you think the hospital should be?" - but it's more process related. And so you can maybe get people's input about the things that are important to them, about how they interact with hospitals, or some sort of medical facility. So that you can use that thinking to develop the criteria for how you evaluate where that should be. So you know, a great example is asking people about how important it is for ease of getting to the hospital, or their accessibility issues, environmental issues around the hospital - that sort of experiential aspect of how they interact with a facility like that. Once you understand their viewpoints, and what's important to them, you sort of reverse engineer those into thinking about the criteria for deciding where it should be. Like in that kind of instance, the public viewpoint would never be a deciding factor. But their thoughts would be contributing input into how you decide to look at a place like that.

Emily 31:11

Okay, sure. But, you know, accessibility, noise parking.. they're all likely important, at least to most people. It still seems a bit of a risk that a public survey will feel like a bit of a hollow exercise, given how many variables there are.

Jennifer 31:27

Mm-hm. There will always be, I think, dissatisfied people. But John disagrees that there's no value at all. He gave an example of just how important it can be to take the needs of the community into account.

John P 31:40

Those kinds of simple day to day kind of interaction considerations, when you actually look at the kinds of properties that get put forward for a potential location, it actually can make a meaningful difference in terms of where is it. Where is it, where's the hospital chosen to go? I wasn't involved in it, but I know that there's still great controversy over the process that was undertaken to find a location for a new hospital in Windsor.

Ultimately, they located in a rural area outside the city... [fades]

Jennifer 32:07

John's referring to the development of an acute care hospital in southwestern Ontario, where a new facility is being built on the outskirts of Windsor, replacing two in-town facilities. A local group of private citizens has been protesting this development for a number of reasons, with accessibility as a key factor. We won't get into all the details. But the court has ruled against the group and ordered them to pay the hospital's legal fees in defending its case. The project is indeed proceeding. And statements from the hospital's lawyer point out that there were several public meetings - perhaps to reinforce that the public already had its say.

John P 32:46

And so I can't speak to the process they went through... but those sorts of things that may on the surface seem simple can play a key role in deciding where something like that goes and where it's located. But I do agree with you that there are definitely circumstances where having those simple types of engagements is really an exercise in obtaining permission. In the sense that "I'm seen to be doing an engagement process and I can say, at the end of the day, no matter what happens, well, we got to talk to the public and we got their input." And it kind of absolves them from a lot of the critique that may happen.

Emily 33:25

For some of these kinds of considerations, there might already be a record of public opinion or preference. Maybe some community work on other projects, or maybe an advocacy group has done some of the legwork already. We asked if they ever reference existing research or work, instead of doing repeated public consultation.

John P 33:44

If we know a stakeholder group has already done work and has been thinking through what the community's needs are, then they're an obvious great target for that kind of interview or focus group style engagement. However, I think this is where politics comes in. And oftentimes, especially in the healthcare space, political masters, and even public servants who are sensitive to what the politics of an issue, often want to see engagement happen for the sake of saying that we went back out and talked to people again, in order to really help protect themselves from an issue management standpoint, against the criticism that "Oh, you didn't talk to the community." That's okay that there was that thought leader that had that piece already about what the community needs or that sort of thing... but no one wants to be caught out and have to answer the question "Well, why didn't you just talk to people anyway?" And so I think there's an impetus from a political standpoint to undergo these additional rounds of engagement, despite the fact there may already be well established thinking in a space.

Emily 34:59

Well, that segues nicely into the political considerations. John had mentioned "small p" politics earlier. And we asked him to explain.

John P 35:10

So it's like the informal basic rules of engagement that exist in every organization or in every circumstance. So if I'm dealing with a merger of two organizations, let's say I need to bring business units together - there's going to be the interpersonal histories and relationships that exist within each of those units that I need to find ways to navigate and bring together, so that I can have a successful combination exist. There are, in a development setting, there are going to be local political issues about what the neighbours want, and what the expectations are for the community and who's promised what, the past and what are the environmental stakeholders. I think navigating all that "small p" politics is huge.

John P 35:58

And in health care it exists as well, obviously, in terms of, you know, there are some groups in the community... again.... I'll give the immediate one that comes to mind, are families who have children with autism. Very well organized, because they were very vocal politically, they made it very difficult

for you not to listen to what they have to say. And those types of considerations, I think, can't be underestimated.

Jennifer 36:21

Yeah, that's my experience. When I was raising my son who had cerebral palsy, I saw the divide between autism and all the other disabilities in terms of programs and funding, even social and support networks. It's one of the few childhood disabilities that specifically gets its own government strategy, which is a testament to how well organized autism groups can be.

Emily 36:46

Yep, which would indeed be hard for policymakers to ignore. It's important to be aware of these kinds of dynamics throughout health care. John referred back again to finding a hospital location.

John P 36:58

Finding a location for a hospital - huge amount of politics when it comes to tons of considerations from local perspectives. And, frankly, dollars and cents, right? Those are big ticket things and whoever owns the land adjacent to where the hospital goes is going to have a good day. And the ones who have land in areas where the hospital's not going to go are not going to be as happy. And so there are tons of things like that. And that's one of the things that we do differently than other organizations who are just looking at engagement. We try and look at those political considerations so that you can build longer term relationships with your stakeholders, be mindful that you're not going to do things that are going to unnecessarily have you walk into a difficult issue. Because the politics weren't paid attention to.

Jennifer 37:44

So these "small p" politics are one set of factors. And of course, there's also the constantly shifting "big p" politics - partisan politics - which has to do with the priorities of which party or individual is in office at a given time. But regardless of who's in office, there's always a constant set of factors related to just dealing with government.

John P 38:07

And this is, broadly speaking, something that a lot of organizations face is that just because they think it's important, they think everyone else thinks it's important. And the reality with government is that the government really doesn't do anything unless it's good for government. And so what you have to do is you have to draw that Venn diagram - figure out what government wants are, you have to feel around the dark corners of the room to understand like, "what does government want?" and then you have to figure out what you want. And you need to get those two circles overlapping as much as possible. And in that intersecting area, that's where you can make stuff happen. Because it's about

getting government to recognize that it's actually in our mutually beneficial interest to do that thing. It's oversimplifying it, but that, at its core, is what a lot of people don't realize. They think, "Oh, I'm a retailer, and I've been struggling so government should do something for me." It's like... not really, unless you can show how it's going to benefit government. So they have a good announcement or can demonstrate how they're helping the sector in some way. It doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get what you want.

Emily 39:20

You know, at first I thought this was a bit tangential to what we were talking about with health policy. But actually, I do think it's quite relevant. I mean, it reveals something crucial about the inner workings of how decisions get made, or proposals or applications get approved. This part is largely invisible to the public.

Jennifer 39:40

Yeah, I agree. When we're only focused on the virtues of engagement, we forget that there are many possible people and organizations invested in whether and how the public is consulted. And that includes the government itself.

Emily 39:55

And even so there may not be alignment between the many levels, departments and Ministries.

John P 40:02

Sometimes the fascinating thing is that on any given issue, different parts of government may be thinking different things about the same issue. And there's a disconnect between them. And when someone is concerned about why isn't this thing happening? You really have to peel back the onion and realize the Ministry is thinking one thing, the public service is thinking the other and the Premier's office is thinking a third thing. And with no alignment, it's quite possible nothing will ever get done in that space until there's alignment. So that's where... that's at the intersection of all the stuff that we do, is trying to bring those things all into a line. So a client like that one that I'm talking about can potentially get what they want. But they're not going to get it until they can show how, at the end of the day, it's good for government. And what's good for government is good for like... show it's going to benefit some portion of the community or business or whatever the defined area that's affected is.

Emily 40:55

Okay, so we can surmise that another reason to consult the public is to demonstrate to the funding body, the government in this case, that the public is, well, interested and engaged and contributing. So then the next logical question would be: why? What is the government's interest in engaging the public

in the way that it does? I mean, at a high level, there would be obvious answers, and may even seem kind of like a silly question. But I suspect there's a lot more to it.

Jennifer 41:28

Yep. A few episodes ago we spoke with Julia Abelson of the Public Engagement in Health Policy Project (supporters of this Health Policy series). And I think this is one of the questions that the research team is contemplating. But let's park that thought for now - might need to be its own episode! Let's go back to John once more. Towards the end of our discussion with him, we admitted that we were still skeptical. We could definitely see that there are indeed reasons to engage and seek public consultation. But whether it amounts to anything substantial, or is indeed any sort of conduit for the public to steer projects in a way that addresses their concerns? Well, I'm not sure the case has been made.

Emily 42:11

And the reality is, we're not going to get to the bottom of it in any one conversation. Firms like StrategyCorp have a specific scope of practice which is negotiated with their clients, not the public or other stakeholders. And anyway, there are limits to what an external provider can influence.

John P 42:29

I think you're absolutely right in your skepticism about some engagement, because people do the first part. And then it's like, oh, that was the extent of what we had to do - was just give the appearance as if we were discussing this with people. And we gave them an opportunity and now we're just going to go out and do what we want anyway. So they're not doing the second part. And I think, for engagement to be effective, it has to have that continuous thread of like two-way communication. Communication isn't successful just because I'm telling you some stuff. You have to also listen to what people are saying in response to that, and, you know, internalize that somehow, adapt the process so it's better next time based on the feedback or whatever the case may be. So as an external provider of engagement services, whether it's in the real estate sector, or working with First Nations or in healthcare, you are only privy to the first half of that. And it's the organizations themselves that really control the degree to which they're going to take the output from those engagement sessions from that whole exercise that you undertook. And actually making it more meaningful to demonstrate: here's how we're putting that into action.

John P 43:37

And our advice is always: that's a critical part of engagement. Because you're never going to build a long term relationship with your stakeholders if you're not doing that. Because they're going to be happy to participate the first time. And then if you're not showing that sort of closed loop of feedback, where you're actually listening to what they're saying, and incorporating some degree... the next time

around, you're going to have poor participation. People are going to just tune out because they're like, "Oh, well, I've been here before, and you don't actually do anything with what they tell you. So why should I invest my time in being part of this?" So I think that's the crux of what you guys are talking about, in my mind anyway. And I don't disagree that there's plenty of engagement that happens that it's just performative. And it's being done for the sake of saying we did it.

Jennifer 44:28

Hey Emily.

Emily 44:29

Hi Jen.

Jennifer 44:31

Well, it was interesting that this conversation included many of our recurring themes, like meaningfulness, what counts as engagement... even the term "hard to reach" made an appearance. It kind of doesn't matter what the situation is. Whenever we talk about engagement, these are the things that come up. But this time, we got to talk about it in a more business context, where the incentives and objectives are spelled out more clearly.

Emily 44:56

Yeah. I mean, StrategyCorp is hired to support engagement. Partly, I think, because clients don't always have capacity to do it themselves. But also because they have a particular expertise. So when we think about engagement in this business context, there's going to be a lot more strategic thinking compared to a setting where there's a pre-existing mandate to engage with patients or the public.

Jennifer 45:18

Yeah, that's right. In those cases, there's usually an air of engagement being more principles-driven. Like, people have a right to participate or engage. But that's not really the message here. I mean, John started the conversation by saying that they're usually hired to do engagement as one of the processes that will help move a project forward, or at least to help avoid problems in moving a project forward.

Emily 45:43

Yep. So we're back full circle to engagement being at the intersection of communications and politics. Engagement can be a tool that gets deployed to facilitate or encourage certain outcomes - whether it's to satisfy funders to remove roadblocks or to build relationships. Many different motives and incentives. But all of it still given the label "engagement."

Jennifer 46:07

Well, you know how we have all these ladders and frameworks and spectrums of engagement? Why not one that explicitly addresses these kinds of differences and motives, like with business or commercial interests on one end, and a more principles-based or democratic rationale on the other? And as with all these sorts of models, a particular activity may show up in more than one place. I don't know... just a thought!

Emily 46:31

Hmm. Now I'm wondering where political motives would fit along this spectrum. Or perhaps it's its own ladder. Something which considers engagement as a way to maybe exert influence. Or show influence. A way to confer legitimacy. Something like that. Anyway, I found the political part of our discussion really intriguing. In the context in which we've discussed patient engagement before, it's almost never explicitly part of the equation, even though it's obviously at play.

Jennifer 47:02

Yeah, maybe the closest we've come is when we spoke with Vasanthi Srinivasan at the beginning of last season. Vasanthi is the Executive Director of the Ontario SPOR Support Unit, and she spent her whole career in the public sector. Her language was similar when she was describing patient engagement and research, and she used a blend of references from business and politics. Like, creating coalitions, and delivering a more refined product (referring to engagement and research). And she was keen to rebrand "patient-oriented research" to "patient-partnered research", to influence how people perceive it.

Emily 47:39

It's like across the whole spectrum of health, health research, healthcare services: there's more of a business-y language on the government end - like talking about impact and products - and more community-infused language on the business end - like talking about engagement and relationship building - which can make it difficult to identify and understand all the different motives for doing public engagement.

Jennifer 48:06

Maybe the main takeaway here is that engagement can't be reduced to just one rationale, one motive, one type of activity. Now, as we've seen in previous episodes it can definitely be undertaken with sincerity and can be thought of as having ethical, moral or democratic underpinnings. And simultaneously, it can be a part of a strategic agenda designed with specific outcomes in mind.

Jennifer 48:34

Big thanks to John Perenack of StrategyCorp for sharing his expertise, experience and insights.

Jennifer 48:44

Matters of Engagement is written and produced by Jennifer Johannesen and Emily Nicholas Angl. If you have feedback, ideas, or just want to say hello, please get in touch through our website at mattersofengagement.com.

Jennifer 48:58

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