

Consulting.

That is, collecting information, suggestions, advice. But not only, as lobbying.

For what: consultation is fundamental in the democratic processes, for transparency and inclusiveness. In most of decision making processes, consultation is performed from the beginning: to receive inputs and ideas, to evaluate social acceptance, to share responsibilities. Sometimes, consultation is confused with participation, when indeed an active involvement in decisions and implementation is required.

How is performed and how used: many methodologies can be adopted. From the open web to restricted meetings for experts. Statistics is mainly used for the analysis of answers, especially when a decision has to be justified as driven by the majority. So, it is crucial the selection of the set of recipients involved for the consultation. Useless to say that many boards, associations, initiatives and projects show the same people sitting at their tables. Useless to say that hundreds of identical answers from individuals should be weighted differently if compared with one voice from a group of thousands. Very frequently, and unfortunately very risky for the impact on the results, one good answer is also neglected if not emerging from the recognized set of relevant stakeholders. Evaluating and including hidden but relevant inputs require indeed intelligence and a deep knowledge of the context.

So, the main challenges for the consultation are: the representativeness and competences of the selected set of recipients, the methodology adopted for the analysis of the answers. Moreover, another aspect is rarely addressed: the “effectiveness” of the consultation.

Let's make an example: to decide what use to give a certain public piece of land.

Set of recipients: environmental no-profit organization, owners of the shops in the surroundings, a group of citizens structured to increase the viability and transport efficiency in the town, a cooperative for social assistance.

Their proposals will probably and respectively be: a green area, a parking, a bus terminal, a center for support to discomfort. The problem is not anymore what decision to take, but why those people were consulted: their answer were expected to be in those directions.

So, why to consult and why people usually repeat always same things?

a) they know just those things, b) they really believe they are the relevant c) they received a mandate to say or have close interests to support them.

Let's make an experiment: identify an argument, invite five people with different experiences and needs to provide comments. Write down, with simple keywords, what you expect from them to say. If you know them well, probably they will fit the keywords!

Often, the results of a consultation, if supported by a careful analysis of the participants, is not providing innovation or unexpected aspects.

Consulting is very expensive, and a huge number of meetings is organized every day in different contexts. Are these meetings effective, or are they merely justifying predicted conclusions and mainly the roles of the participants themselves?

Nowadays, many techniques for hunting and scouting information have been updated, especially with the access to data on the web. The amount of data available is rocketing too.

Reducing meetings and un-necessary consultation could allow saving public money. Meetings therefore should be used to support decisions, when negotiation and compromises have to be reached. Not to show, not to list expected requests to be included in trivial conclusions. Wishes and feasible actions should be clearly distinguished: there is a time for brainstorming, one for reflection and one for action. So, any meeting and consultation should be closely linked to the objective they are organized for.

Just for fun, as a provocation, a meeting could be organized with a preliminary analysis of the profiles of participants, listing their experiences, interests and behaviors. Based on these inputs, building different options for conclusions to be sent in advance and ask them to vote for one of the options or to confirm their participation in case they suppose the conclusions will be dramatically different from the proposed. Let's then learn from the reactions...what will win: intelligence or habit?

In order to tackle emerging complex challenges, we should adopt innovative approaches and ideas. Proximity and connectivity is fundamental for human relations, as well as dialogue and agreement for adopting and implementing joint actions. But there are different methods to address these aspects with different levels of efficiency...