

## Reaching those parts other partnerships cannot reach: overcoming the negative contact loop

Sometimes those people we need the most are the ones that, for one reason or another, we seemingly value the least. We may speak warmly of their virtues and importance to us, but our rhetoric is not matched by a personal investment of time. Like the 'much loved' Great Aunt they are talked of warmly in their absence, but never travelled to and warmly embraced in person.

Similarly, some multi – sector partnerships<sup>1</sup> talk very convincingly about the importance of engaging with 'Hard to Reach'<sup>2</sup> (HtR) stakeholders and interest groups, but then find it difficult to follow up these words with meaningful attempts at real and lasting contact.

Undoubtedly there are real time and resource constraints that impede partnerships' ability to engage with HtR groups. Additionally, partnerships may not possess the expertise or local contacts necessary for the successful engagement of some segments of their stakeholder population.

But also, perhaps, some partnerships may feel very apprehensive about the type of reception they might receive from certain groups, and as a result they may question how useful any consultation with them could prove to be.

As a result of the above constraints and feelings, engagement with HtR groups can sometimes be undertaken not exactly grudgingly, but then again not exactly enthusiastically either. The forms and rituals of consultation are likely to be observed, and a professional approach adopted, but with the partnership's defences very much in place.

The representatives of local community and HtR groups that attend a consultation meeting will quickly deduce whether or not a partnership's defences are in place from what they see, hear and experience. They will notice how the seating has been arranged and the presence or absence of a raised platform. They will see an abundance or dearth of suits and uniforms. They will notice how the

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<sup>1</sup> Multi – sector partnerships are created to deal with complex issues that single agencies would find difficult to handle effectively. Health, social, environmental, and educational type issues are their usual focus of interest. Public, private and voluntary sector organisations can all be involved in this type of partnership.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hard to Reach' is the term most commonly used by those working in partnerships to describe stakeholders or other interested parties who are difficult to engage with positively because of their social, cultural, environmental, economic, educational and/or other demographic characteristics.

agenda is presented and the way introductions are made (first name and informal or status laden and formal). They will sense the presence of any attempts at a separation between 'them' and 'us'.

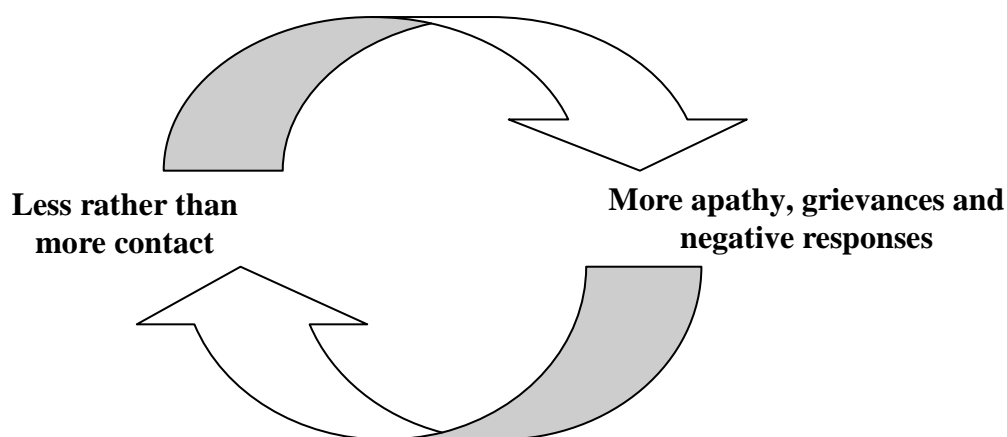
And they will react according to their perceptions. If they sense that a partnership's defences are up, their overall reaction can be summed up as follows:

'If this is the way it is going to be, we will react as you seem to expect! Being as we do not see you very often, and when we do it's very much at arm's length, here are, in no uncertain terms, our feelings and grievances!'

In short, the HtR groups will switch to broadcast rather than receive mode, and concentrate on stating their needs and wants at the expense of listening to what the partnership has to offer.

The partnership's representatives, having prepared themselves for exactly this type of reaction, tighten up the back straps of their professional masks and raise further their large grey shields of formality. They will tough things out as best they can. Then, once the meeting is over and they are safely alone, they will breathe several sighs of relief in recognition of the fact that their obligations have been fulfilled and that they can now get back to the important tasks associated with running the partnership.

All the parties involved in the above type of encounter have become caught up in a Negative Contact Loop:



The starting point is less rather than more contact, perhaps confined purely to that which is required by statute. When there is contact, all those involved perceive it as almost ritualistically 'going through the motions'.

As a result, those being consulted either shrug disappointedly, abstaining from involvement, or do their best to make an impression, getting their grievances, complaints and pent up emotions off their chests and firmly and uncomfortably into the laps of those doing the consulting.

Those on the receiving end of the grievances and complaints have all their worst fears about 'Hard to Reach' groups confirmed, and they become even more determined to limit any further contact with these 'difficult' people.

And so it goes, everybody caught up in a spiral of ever diminishing engagement: the 'Negative Contact Loop'.

## **How do you create a Positive Contact Loop?**

So, how do you overcome the above problems and start to create an effective engagement process with those groups that are most hard to reach? How do you go about forming a 'Positive Contact Loop'?

Here are seven things you can do:

- 1. Tailor your engagement and communication approaches to the needs and preferences of those you most need to reach.**

Concentrate on accessibility and attractiveness. Would informal get togethers arranged near where HtR people live be more effective and accessible than more formal meetings held in very official, perhaps more distant and off – putting surroundings? Would an attractive hard copy newsletter or partnership update, written and presented in a style suited to the target audience, raise interest in the work of the partnership more effectively than a jargon laden missive posted on an official web site? Would some kind of stimulating, enjoyable activity focused upon the interests and/or needs of local communities generate greater enthusiasm for the goals and activities of the partnership than a more traditional public meeting?

- 2. Create and offer transparency of process and decision making.**

Show all those affected by the partnership's work how the information and insights they provide are used to inform its actions and priorities. Weave the opinions and local knowledge of HtR stakeholders into the day to day conduct and work of the partnership. Do everything you can to put the decision making of the partnership within sight of those that are most hard to reach.

Here are some things you can try:

- Set up official 'Stakeholder Forums' and give them oversight of the partnership's work, plus the ability to criticise and offer suggestions for improvement.
  - Create informal 'Stakeholder Clubs' where all stakeholders, including HtR groupings, are encouraged to attend, hear updates about the partnership's work, give their comments and reactions, and offer local knowledge that could be helpful to the partnership's work.
  - Hold 'Open Strategy' meetings where key stakeholders are encouraged to not only comment on proposed partnership goals and actions, but also contribute to their creation and agreement.
  - Hold 'Honesty in Action' meetings where partners and stakeholders discuss ongoing issues and problems openly, without any sense of blame.
  - Embed the partnership's key functions and personnel within the communities it is seeking to help and support.
3. **Embrace conflict and difference.** Perceive conflict, difference and perhaps even anger<sup>3</sup> as a positive sign that the partnership could be starting to engage with its stakeholders in a meaningful, productive way. Assume that a non-judgmental exploration of the issues surrounding conflicts and differences will help discover new insights and synergies of benefit to the partnership and its work. Make sure your own day to day behaviour, and also that of the partnership overall, models an enthusiasm for new and challenging opinions and ideas.
4. **Seek out new paths towards engagement.** Boldly go where no one involved with the partnership has gone before. Seek out wider and more diverse paths towards those that are most difficult to reach. Discover how HtR stakeholders and communities communicate with each other and seek to become part of these networks. Find out how other agencies, charities and partnerships connect effectively with their HtR stakeholders. Seek to copy them or 'piggyback' on their success.

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<sup>3</sup> Angry people 'talking at you' may be the first stage in getting them to 'talk with you'.

5. **Co-ordinate your consultation efforts.** Make every effort to link up the consultation activities of individual partners. Make a point of identifying blind spots in the partnership's areas of focus, especially where these could relate to HtR groups. Also, look out for any duplication of effort between partners, as too much consultation can cause confusion and lead to some groups disappearing almost entirely from view, because they feel overly targeted or even picked upon.
  
6. **Build the capability of those you most need to engage with and identify volunteers.** Encourage HtR communities to develop skills important to the partnership's work. Identify, develop and support volunteers from HtR areas. Provide these volunteers with opportunities to visit other partnerships and communities with similar problems. Encourage them, upon their return, to share their learning and insights. Focus on transferring the key learning to those in need of it the most.
  
7. **Win over hearts and minds with high profile actions that provide quick, positive results for HtR communities.** Make sure these actions gain maximum visibility within the stakeholder communities of most importance to the partnership. Clearly relate these quick wins to the partnership's key strategic goals, aspirations and overall vision.

## Summary

Sometimes, those people that a partnership needs to engage with the most are the most 'Hard to Reach'.

This can be because of:

- Lack of time, resources, expertise and appropriate contacts.
- Feelings of apprehension about how the partnership and its work will be received by Hard to Reach groups.
- Uncertainties about the usefulness of consultation with Hard to Reach groups.

The above issues can lead to consultation with Hard to Reach groups becoming overly formal, defensive and restricted.

In response, Hard to Reach groups may either opt out of the consultation process or switch to broadcast rather than receive mode

(firmly stating their needs and wants at the expense of listening to what a partnership can offer).

A partnership, faced with this response, can have its worst fears confirmed. It may, therefore, seek to limit any future engagement still further.

The above process creates a Negative Contact Loop – a spiral of ever diminishing engagement.

A Negative Contact Loop can be overcome by creating a Positive Contact Loop.

A Positive Contact Loop can be created by:

- Tailoring your engagement and communication approaches to the needs and preferences of those you most need to reach.
- Creating and offering transparency of process and decision making.
- Embracing conflict and difference.
- Seeking out new paths towards engagement.
- Co-ordinating your consultation efforts.
- Building the capability of those you most need to engage with and identifying volunteers.
- Winning over hearts and minds with meaningful, high profile actions that provide quick, positive results for HtR communities.