#MONTHLYMYTH: TRANSPARENCY & RISK GO HAND IN HAND

'Transparency' is a key term in the world of engagement.   We all know that it's central to any robust, effective engagement process.

It's also a word that, for some, goes hand in hand with risk and a loss of order and control. That makes sense - because being honest, sharing the problem and providing in-depth insights into an issue can feel scary.

The funny thing about transparency though, is that it's a little counterintuitive. Often, it's actually a critical part of risk mitigation. That's because increased transparency is directly linked to increased accountability, which is linked to community confidence that you will follow through.

A lack of transparency, on the other hand, can expose an organisation to a whole host of risks that far outweigh the discomfort associated with a little openness.

MYTH:

The more transparent and open and organisation is, the more risk it's exposed to.

IN REALITY:

Here's some reasons to be brave, risks to be aware of and key starting points when it comes to transparency. The following concepts are based on proven engagement principles and tangible results we have experienced across a range of different processes (including some tricky issues).

Why would an organisation choose to be more transparent?

- Releasing information is often the first step in building accountability and trust.
- Sharing early is like insurance.   The biggest mistake people make in keeping secrets? Assuming no one will find out! Get out there early, because having something uncovered down the track is a bad look.
- When leaders openly acknowledge the unknowns or past errors, communities and stakeholders entrenched around a difficult issue start to make a positive shift
- Communities and stakeholders have increasingly high expectations around organisational transparency and are often monitoring you closely – dishonesty stands out.

What are the risks associated with a lack of transparency?

Community

A perception that your organisation is hiding things causes damage to relationships and processes, and give rise to misinformation, emotion and outrage.

Organisation

Decreased accountability and trust results in risks to an organisation's reputation.

Process

Engagement processes and big projects are likely to stall, fail or yield low value results.

Where should we start?

At a minimum, an organisation MUST release reports detailing findings from engagement activities. Otherwise you are going to look like you're tampering with or covering up community feedback. The risks associated with not releasing (or adulterating) these findings can affect both the organisation and the consultants or facilitators involved in that process – both of your reputations will be tarnished.

If you're planning an engagement process, get early internal agreement that the outputs from the process will be published. This commitment will reduce the risk of someone reneging down the track (and you may want to get it in writing).

From there, there needs to be frank internal discussions about what your participants need in terms of information (see this post on how to know what information and how much).   Every process benefits from honesty and transparency, so set the bar high and aim to put everything relevant on the table. This may include sharing dilemmas, challenges, information gaps etc.

'Track us don't trust us'. In the words of the great Peter Sandman (risk communication guru) - '"Trust' is a false god!". Aiming for trust is unachievable, and it's too much to ask of communities and stakeholders - especially if they have been disappointed by you or your organisation in the past. Instead of aiming for trust, aim to be accountable. Do this by providing regular detailed updates and progress data (especially if that data is negative and shows no progress) and never ask them to trust you – instead ask them to track your work closely.

If you're dealing with a hot issue, emotion and outrage or an area where the organisation has made mistakes in the past, you need to be transparent on a whole new level. Expert support is recommended, and MosaicLab offers a range of services that can help.

We've summarised all the top tips from this post into a handy free download. Perfect for sharing, printing or filing away for future use. Click the image to subscribe to our monthly e-newsletter 'The Discussion' and grab this free resource.

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OVER TO YOU

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