



STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT: DEMOCRACY'S URGENT TASK

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Strategic Engagement: Democracy's Urgent Task

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PREFACE



Strategic engagement is often understood at its most manifest: purpose-driven, long-term and influence-oriented. It is designed to shape decisions, build stakeholder relationships, and support decision-making for sustained impact. Ideally, it is a transparent, inclusive and responsive practice that can rebuild trust in democracy. More complex, latent understandings, however, suggest strategic engagement's emphasis on alignment with organisational and policy goals can skew into self-serving interests, especially when tied to political agendas. By comparison, it seems far from the contingent nature of community engagement shaped by local contexts.

However, here a dynamic interplay is at stake. While the evolution of community engagement has historically emerged from bottom-up efforts shaped by local needs, strategic engagement has developed within institutional settings as a deliberate, goal-oriented approach to influence policy and decision-making. Indeed, the definitional beginnings of strategic engagement are firmly within organisational contexts of the early 2000s, where policy-driven approaches and institutionally managed processes can suggest a depoliticisation of participation in the extreme.

Increasing attention to strategic engagement, then, needs to be considered in relation to our current historic juncture, where the world is waist-deep in distrust. The global landscape is marked by a lack of trust in democracy as societies attain a new

equilibrium of contradiction that threatens the very foundations of democratic systems. This requires new thinking around not only the ethics of engagement but also rebuilding trust at scale. This presents challenges to strategic engagement, particularly in relation to two themes: 'faux' or performative consultation, on the one hand, and political decision-makers having little to no understanding of engagement, on the other. Ironically, the professionalisation of practice has led to specialisation and fragmentation of engagement, seeing it as a separate discipline rather than a leadership responsibility. This further creates a tension between the lack of depth of expertise inside government and broader organisational integration, where engagement is not afforded priority in government contexts and poor timing and poor consultation result in 'cookie-cutter' engagement. It also perpetuates an urban-rural policy rift and views engagement as a late-stage compliance step rather than a strategic function. Misinformation and disinformation, posing the most significant immediate threat to democracy globally, further erode the foundation upon which meaningful engagement is built.

The central question underlying this research is how to increase value, awareness and understanding of strategic engagement with decision-makers. As with my previous publications in the Engagement Institute's Thought Leadership series, this question was put to senior executives, academics, policy- and decision-makers, and consultants





Democracy faces an urgent crisis of trust and contradiction that demands more than passive observation.

across government, research, corporate and not-for-profit organisations in Australia and New Zealand. Here, however, the research includes interviews with senior political leaders and political stakeholders. Given this, the report offers firsthand insight into policy-level perspectives on the urgent challenges facing democracy amid rising threats to trust and institutions.

In addressing the enquiry, the report is organised into three sections:

1. A critical survey of current research on the emergence of strategic engagement as both a practice and developing field, examining its relevance in the context of institutional distrust.
2. Contemporary challenges affecting the implementation and impact of strategic engagement across policy, governance and institutional contexts.
3. Recommendations for practitioners and organisations to embed engagement at a strategic level, enhancing its influence on institutional priorities and democratic trust.

As in my earlier contributions, this report seeks to translate research into

accessible insights to support engagement practitioners, policy- and decision-makers, and broader audiences concerned with democratic practices.

I wish to acknowledge all interviewees for their contributions to this research, especially Sara Bice, Mr Roy Butler MP, Mayor Peter Flannery, Nick Leggett, Leigh Moran, Dr Daniel Mulino MP and Meegan Sullivan.

Democracy faces an urgent crisis of trust and contradiction that demands more than passive observation. This research offers a valuable resource for advancing conversations around engagement's active and necessary role in shaping an ethical, sustainable and thriving democratic future. At the same time, it challenges us to confront the deeper tensions structuring our political reality and to engage with the fragile, contested ground on which democracy now stands. As such, it examines strategic engagement as one of democracy's most urgent tasks, as understanding its challenges within political contexts is essential to navigating an era marked by distrust and instability.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategic engagement is both high-level and goal-focused, and is increasingly used in corporate, research and governance fields. However, it maintains negative connotations when tied to political agendas. Framing this report is the question of how to increase value, awareness and understanding of strategic engagement with decision-makers. Yet, oriented toward aligning community input with institutional objectives and policy goals in an outcome-driven way, strategic engagement risks shifting participation from a democratic practice to a policy-driven exercise. This occurs alongside a broader lack of strategic engagement expertise among decision-makers – especially where engagement is delayed, deprioritised or inconsistent.

This report is the fifth in the Engagement Institute's Thought Leadership Series, which provides sector-wide research into challenges across engagement practice and policy. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with political leaders covering all levels of government, as well as decision-makers, academics and senior executives across Australia and New Zealand, it offers rare insight into the strategic role of engagement from those shaping policy and governance. Incorporating exclusive interviews conducted with political stakeholders, the report offers firsthand insight into policy-level perspectives to provide an authoritative understanding of the urgent challenges confronting democracy amid rising threats to trust and institutions.

Five critical challenges shaping strategic engagement and democratic trust

Five critical challenges identified through this research significantly influence the effectiveness of strategic engagement in building trust in democratic processes:

1. Definition of strategic engagement and risks in politically driven outcomes

Mistrust around definition results in obstacles to implementation and stakeholder exclusion, particularly when tied to political intention. More can be done to mitigate risk by clearly defining purpose, ethical boundaries and core engagement principles.

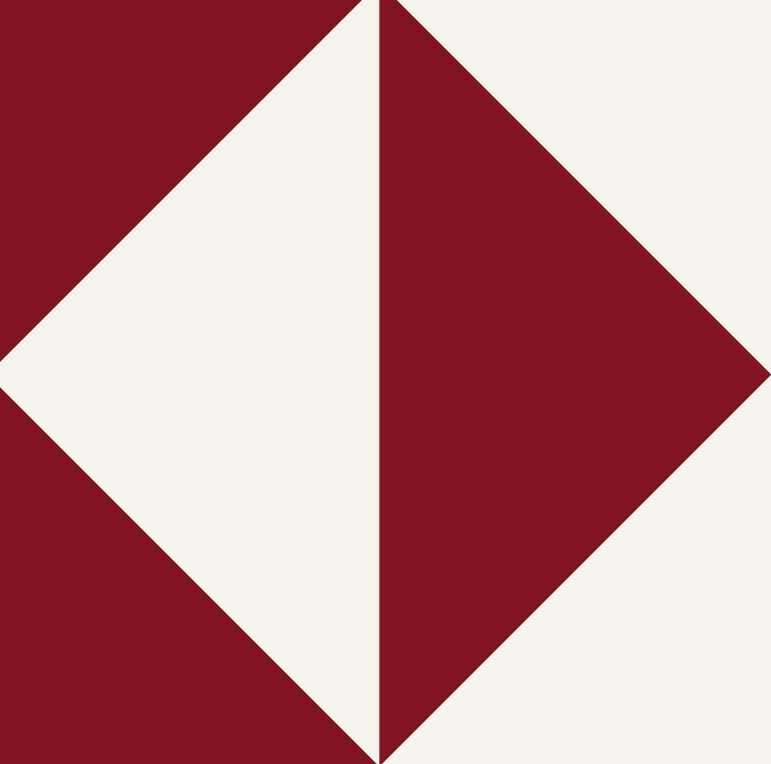
2. Poor practice and performative engagement in government consultations

Where poor consultation weakens the foundation of strategic engagement, failure to prioritise engagement in government contexts has led to reactive, transactional engagement, including a failure to address localised needs that perpetuates an urban-rural policy rift.

3. The expertise gap, political blowback and fear of feedback

Lack of clarity and expertise undermines engagement, leading to mismatched expectations and reinforcing public scepticism, where lack of expertise and fear of political blowback create a gridlock to understanding strategic engagement and lead to performative engagement.





Strategic engagement risks shifting participation from a democratic practice to a policy-driven exercise. This occurs alongside a broader lack of strategic engagement expertise among decision-makers – especially where engagement is delayed, deprioritised or inconsistent.

4. Engagement specialisation and fragmentation

Specialisation in engagement can create barriers with decision-makers, who may see it as peripheral rather than a leadership imperative. Reframing engagement as a strategic function, not just a discrete activity, is key to strengthening its role in decision-making.

5. Engaging in an era of mis- and disinformation

Disinformation erodes the trust and legitimacy that meaningful engagement relies on, leading decision-makers to view it as a reputational risk and stakeholders to dismiss it as performative. Strengthening how engagement is legitimised and communicated is essential to building authenticity and trust.

Key recommendations

Based on these findings, this report outlines key actions to elevate the value, awareness and understanding of strategic engagement among decision-makers, strengthen trust in democratic processes, and support the effective prioritisation of engagement practices.

- Establish a standardised definition and framework
- Co-design with political stakeholders
- Create a multifaceted approach to government engagement
- Share real-world outcomes – good and bad – with industry leaders
- Improve accountability through accessible feedback
- Reframe business imperative
- Early evaluation in government engagement
- Embed systematic and transparent practice
- Integrate technology
- Use media
- Clear, inclusive language and communication
- Bridge the region-city divide
- Advance engagement legislation
- Lead with transparency
- Balance engagement and political cycle



INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, strategic engagement has been in increasing use in corporate, research and governance fields. Often aiming to capture long-term, proactive and deliberate efforts in building stakeholder relationships, it seeks to align engagement with organisational goals. Where the benefits of strategic engagement emphasise its alignment with organisational purpose and value-driven decision-making, it facilitates transparency and fosters trust, particularly in supporting Engagement, Social, Governance (ESG) frameworks, where sustainable practices are critical to reputation and operational success. Criticism, however, surfaces in the very idea of organisational alignment, most notably in its use in government contexts. Unlike community engagement's marked attention to the contingent nature of community voices and needs, strategic engagement's emphasis on alignment can skew engagement into self-serving interests, particularly when tied to political agendas and policy outcomes. As one interviewee suggests: 'We have to be very careful that it doesn't become a type of engagement that people see as a manipulation. Especially if leaning towards political stakeholders when considering long-term engagement and trust.'

Indeed, recent research suggests that when tied to a political agenda, there is less trust in engagement.¹ Decline in trust, moreover,

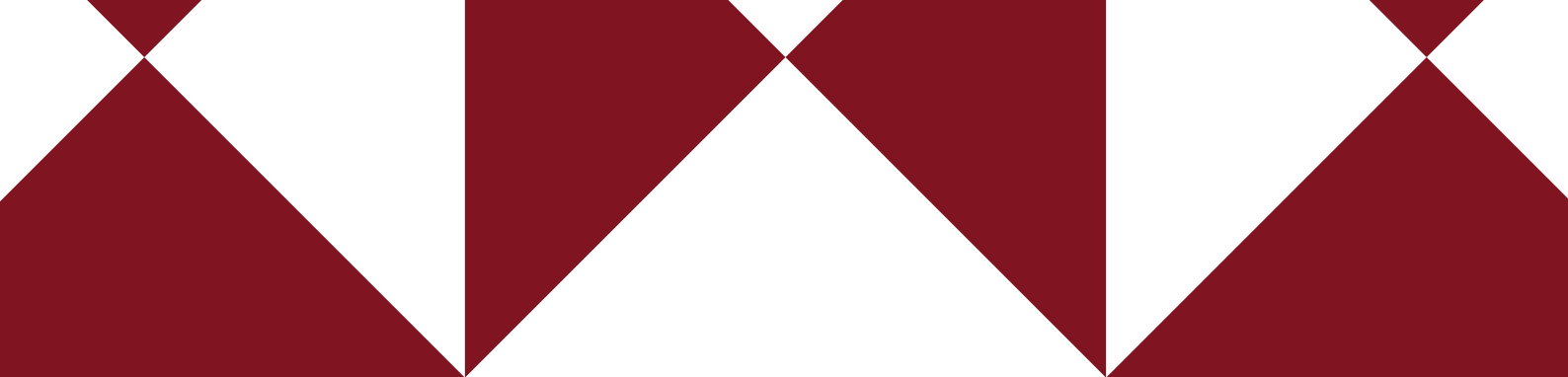
is tied to intensive project environments such as infrastructure, where current project politicisation is 'further abrading public trust'.² This can redouble a lack of uptake of engagement, or as one interviewee put it, 'Once communities hear it's a government engagement, people just switch off.' But it also surfaces a negative concept of strategic engagement, one that is more focused on shaping perceptions rather than addressing genuine stakeholder and community needs; for instance, through inadequate feedback mechanisms that lead to a top-down approach and already-reached decisions – ingredients for the conditions for poor consultation discussed below.

One understanding for this negative concept of strategic engagement might be found in the evolution of engagement itself. From its beginnings in grassroots advocacy and activism in the late 1960s, the practice has evolved through what might be called a 'middle generation' balancing 'purist' engagement with strategic value, to its current widespread professionalisation and legislation across non-profit, for-profit and public contexts. Beginning with Sheree Arnstein's 'Ladder of Public Participation', itself published at a major inflection point in the US – the activation of civil rights that heralded the changing role of citizens – the conception of power dynamics in public decision-making has provided a foundation

¹When political engagement is perceived as serving an agenda, it can exacerbate feelings of distrust and alienation among citizens. See Prats, Mariana, Smid, Sina and Monica Ferrín (2024), 'Lack of trust in institutions and political engagement: An analysis based on the 2021 OECD Trust Survey,' *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, Paris, available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/lack-of-trust-in-institutions-and-political-engagement_83351a47-en.html.

²The Crawford School of Public Policy's research emphasises that when engagement is perceived as aligned with specific political agendas, it can lead to a decline in trust. See Bice, Sara (2023), 'Infrastructure for Sustainable Futures: Challenges, opportunities and questions to inform community engagement and social practice,' Institute for Infrastructure in Society, Crawford School of Public Policy, Canberra, available at https://www.nextgenengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ANU-I2S-2023-Situation-Analysis_Infrastructure-for-Sustainable-Futures.pdf. The Next Generation Engagement 2022 research report found that 56% of respondents felt that opportunities for genuine community engagement are reduced when politicians announce projects – a perception that contributes to a lack of trust in government processes, as community members feel their ability to influence decisions is undermined by political agendas.





for many of the central concepts that have shaped engagement research and practice. Public participation models across almost six decades continue to engender this central vision (evidenced by the *Local Government Act 2020* in Victoria, Australia, that enshrines the alignment of community engagement principles to IAP2 core values). This also extends beyond the sector, particularly in patient- or consumer-centred healthcare in a post-COVID context.³

Strategic engagement, conversely, marks its definitional beginnings in organisational contexts in the early 2000s. It suggests an emphasis on alignment between community involvement and institutional objectives. In the extreme, it focuses on aligning public input with organisational goals in a more structured and outcomes-driven approach. Broadly speaking, the shift from grassroots activism to strategic engagement can reflect a move from bottom-up, citizen-led challenges to power structures and to institutionally managed processes. This doesn't serve to discount its usefulness in policy shifts and outcomes, or its formation

through political and grassroots activism. Indeed, it can be argued that strategic engagement has underscored positive outcomes, particularly when applied to research into improved outcomes for Indigenous policies and co-governance.⁴

However, when aligned with policy goals, it can imply a depoliticisation of participation, where engagement becomes a tool for managing dissent and aligning public input with predefined objectives. This potentially limits transformative political action and reinforces existing power dynamics. UK researcher Chris Anastasi's work on strategic stakeholder engagement, while it provides a framework for influencing policy and decision-making, inadvertently reveals tension points that hinder effective community engagement.⁵ (Or as recently argued in relation to the ability to reinforce long-term thinking and assess the risks of climate heating, it can have 'unintended consequences' where 'the widespread and active engagement of citizens may not deliver community-sensitive decisions.')⁵

³ Schiavo, R. (2021), 'What is true community engagement and why it matters (now more than ever),' *Journal of Communication in Healthcare*, Volume 14, Number 2; 91–92: doi.org/10.1080/17538068.2021.1935569. Schiavo cites the Center for Disease Control and Prevention Principles of Community Engagement (1997) to argue that 'true' engagement in a post-COVID context, should create new power dynamics as a catalyst for change.

⁴ In *Rethinking the Design of Indigenous Organisations: the Need for Strategic Engagement* (2007), David Martin argues that 'strategic engagement' refers to the processes through which Indigenous individuals, groups and communities are able to interact with, contribute to, draw from – and of course potentially reject – the formal and informal institutions of the dominant Australian society in a considered and informed manner that provides them with real choices as to where to go, and how to get there. It refers to a process, not an outcome.' See also Hunt, Janet, *Engaging with Indigenous Australia: exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities*, Issues paper no.5 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, 2013. Recent criticisms exist around inadequately addressing the complexities of local governance systems, cultural values and Indigenous governance. For discussion on systemic limitations to engagement, see the 2023 discussion paper on 'Recognition Place', The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/>.

⁵ Chris Anastasi's *Strategic Stakeholder Engagement*, Routledge (2018), emphasises the shift in engagement practice from grassroots advocacy to strategic, top-down approaches aimed at influencing decision-makers in government and building relationships with stakeholders to shape policy and regulation. Anastasi highlights that effective stakeholder engagement requires aligning the interests of diverse parties while maintaining a focus on institutional objectives – a framework that prioritises strategic outcomes over broader participatory goals.



For where strategic engagement runs the risk of manipulation, stakeholders feel that their input is being solicited merely to fulfil a requirement rather than being genuinely considered. Moreover, insincere feedback mechanisms can lead to community withdrawal from future engagement. The emphasis on building relationships for decision outcomes may inadvertently prioritise certain voices and lead to marginalisation of less powerful groups, resulting in an incomplete understanding of community needs and priorities. Furthermore, the focus on short-term wins, such as immediate policy changes, runs counter to fostering long-term relationships with communities.

Emphasis on top-down strategies, risk of manipulation, and potential short-term focus all highlight areas where strategic engagement may falter in fostering genuine collaboration and trust within communities. As one interviewee suggests: 'In the hands of the wrong people or used for the wrong intent or motivation, you could get narratives coming from the top, which suggests that the things being proposed are strategic when they're not. How do engagement professionals retain control of the consultations and of the narratives that come out of those consultations when community-related concerns are raised to that strategic level?'

'Faux consultation' and the need for strategic engagement

With its formalisation across sectors in the late 2000s, engagement became recognised

as essential for effective government and governance, particularly in public policy development where stakeholder input is critical. (The renewables sector is a prime example – in particular, the Australian Government's Community Engagement Review, which recommends meaningful engagement to ensure community support and participation in renewable energy transition.) However, any emphasis on the distinction between community and strategic engagement becomes clear through a focus on how organisations incorporate feedback into their decision-making processes. With the wide adoption of engagement across sectors – government, non-profits and businesses – engagement practices reflected a growing understanding of the importance of stakeholder relationships in achieving long-term goals. Parallel to this broad adoption, however, there seems to be a lack of widespread use of the term 'strategic engagement' inside engagement practice and research. As one interviewee suggests: 'I don't know what strategic engagement is. I don't see it as a really normalised thing. It's not something that we talk about. It's not a term, until this conversation, that I've heard used.'

"In the hands of the wrong people or used for the wrong intent or motivation, you could get narratives coming from the top, which suggests that the things being proposed are strategic when they're not."





This knot between the widespread adoption and lack of use of the term ‘strategic engagement’ is further complicated by the idea that decision-makers are untutored in the expertise of engagement at a strategic level. Poor practice and poor consultation, or what one interviewee described as ‘faux consultation’, has left some political stakeholders with little to no understanding of engagement expertise. ‘Governments across the country don’t think about engagement at the strategic level. They think about it late. They often want a project to succeed, but it is a policy on political priority.’ Indeed, the lack of early engagement is a major challenge identified across this research, especially with political stakeholders. (This is also a key component of my earlier research findings around limited community influence in public decision-making.) To put it another way, where engagement is de-prioritised in a governmental context – particularly with the perception that engagement might lead to more negative feedback than positive – calls for strategic engagement are magnified.

Here, the rationale for this research is highlighted. Particularly where reframing engagement as a risk-mitigation strategy can highlight the significant financial and reputational costs of poor engagement

practices.⁶ As one interviewee puts it, taking a ‘more holistic and stronger review of engagement’ presents a response to the fact that political stakeholders delay or de-prioritise engagement: ‘They view engagement as a way to get feedback from the community that they may not necessarily like. So, engagement is not afforded the priority that it should be given, nor does there seem to be much focus on the idea that good engagement can improve the chances of the project being successful rather than the other way around.’ Further complications arise in government contexts in the challenge around engaging remote and rural communities, especially where decisions are made centrally. As one interviewee suggests, ‘top-down culture of government, particularly at a department level, reinforces [that] decisions are made without genuine community input.’

Poor timing and poor consultation, then, can indicate a need for strategic engagement. ‘Performative consultation processes’, as one interviewee puts it, leave communities feeling they have little influence in decisions that impact them. It can be argued that the current state of engagement, characterised by its widespread professionalisation, has issued a clarion call for more strategic

⁶Reframing engagement as a risk-mitigation strategy, particularly in the context of project management, emphasises financial and reputational costs associated with engagement practices, particularly evident in the renewables sector, where the role of social licence and frameworks for effective community engagement are a means of risk mitigation. See Hügel, Stephen and Anna R. Davies (2020), ‘Public participation, engagement, and climate change adaptation: A review of the research literature’, *WIREs Climate Change*, Volume 11, Issue 4, doi.org/10.1002/wcc.645. See also Esiri, Andrew, Kwakye Mensah, Jephtha, Ekechukwu, Darlington, Ogundipe, Olorunshogo and Augusta Ikevuje (2024), ‘Public perception and policy development in the transition to renewable energy’, *Magna Scientia Advanced Research and Reviews*, Volume 8: 228–237, doi: 10.30574/msarr.2023.8.2.0101.



approaches. For this professionalisation has simultaneously led to engagement's specialisation and fragmentation, creating a tension between the depth of expertise inside government and broader organisational integration. Because engagement is not integrated early enough in government decision-making, it has resulted in narrow perspectives, which, coupled with poor engagement practices, erode institutional trust and confidence in democratic processes. But where 'bigger picture engagement' needs to underscore community, particularly in the context of politically driven engagement, it also needs to take heed of the ongoing nature and future of communities: 'Working in a comprehensive way, moving away from project-level engagement to much bigger picture engagement can be very powerful. So, how can we meet communities where they're at and understand what it is that they want for their community as a whole? What are the intergenerational expectations?'

The issue then is not around the framing of strategic engagement as manipulative, as the argument for bottom-up community engagement might suggest, but, as this research will show, it is to safeguard its caution in relation to already understood tenets and evidence-based principles of core values of engagement. For, where strategic engagement brings value through alignment with organisational goals and efficient resource allocation, its effectiveness often hinges on an organisation's commitment to authentic, inclusive and transparent practices. The evolution of the term 'strategic engagement', like the inception of community engagement itself, might reflect broader societal changes regarding participation, governance and the role of communities in shaping policies that affect them. Together, they represent an ongoing dialogue about how best to facilitate meaningful interactions between communities and decision-makers.

Countering ambiguity in practice

In theory, strategic engagement can be described as high-level and goal-focused. By comparison, community engagement is inclusive and relationship-based. However, in practice, the lines are not so clear. Strategic goals often require community engagement to gain local insights, build legitimacy and foster trust with broader audiences and stakeholders. Similarly, effective community engagement frequently influences strategic decisions, as community insights shape organisational policies and public relations strategies. This overlap can make it challenging to apply a strict distinction, as both approaches often work in tandem to achieve organisational objectives and social value.

This research identifies the challenges surrounding increasing the value, awareness and understanding of strategic engagement with decision-makers. As with my three previous publications in the Engagement Institute's Thought Leadership series, these research findings are the result of in-depth interviews with key actors and subject matter experts across Australia and New Zealand's policy and engagement sector, spanning private and public organisations. Here, however, I include interviews with senior political leaders and politicians. By incorporating these perspectives, this qualitative research offers critical insights into the evolving field of strategic engagement. It provides readers – particularly engagement practitioners and professionals, politicians and leaders – with a deeper understanding of how to strengthen institutional relationships and build trust in democratic processes for and with community stakeholders.





The evolution of the term 'strategic engagement', like the inception of community engagement itself, might reflect broader societal changes regarding participation, governance and the role of communities in shaping policies that affect them.

Five major challenges are identified as impacting the role of strategic engagement in improving trust in democracy and democratic processes:

1. Definition of strategic engagement and risks in politically driven outcomes
2. Poor practice and performative engagement in government consultations
3. The expertise gap, political blowback and fear of feedback
4. Engagement specialisation and fragmentation
5. Engaging in an era of mis- and disinformation

These challenges, while discrete, are interconnected and often represent different facets of the same issue. For instance, concerns around definitions of strategic engagement can inform poor practice and vice versa. Equally, expertise gaps in government consultations are buoyed by the specialisation and fragmentation of engagement practice. Together, these challenges offer a foundation for examining the complexities in defining and practising strategic engagement, and the implications for advancing and innovating engagement within contemporary political stakeholder contexts. The research's distinctive focus – on raising the value, awareness and understanding of strategic engagement among decision-makers to enhance trust in democratic processes – provides a conceptual framework for rethinking the intricate relationship between meaningful community engagement and strategic practice. This is not only to achieve improved policy outcomes that strengthen governance, but also to position engagement as imperative to rebuilding trust in government and democratic processes at this historic juncture when democracy is under threat.⁷

⁷ See Strengthening Democracy Taskforce (2024), *Strengthening Australian democracy: A practical agenda for democratic resilience*, Department of Home Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia.



CHALLENGES

Defining strategic engagement

'We have to be very careful it doesn't become a type of engagement people see as a manipulation.'

Defining strategic engagement to focus on high-impact stakeholders excludes communities from meaningful participation in decisions that affect them. This creates a disconnect between those implementing policy and those experiencing its outcomes. To be sure, research has highlighted that policies developed without robust community engagement are more likely to face public resistance, reputational risk and potential project delays due to community opposition. (The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner (AEIC)'s independent Community Engagement Review, for instance, was prompted by the recognition that insufficient engagement contributed to opposition and delays in

renewable energy projects.) But engagement tied to political agendas can also increase the potential for the possible exclusion of community. In addition, it can prioritise forms of engagement. That is, where strategic engagement is defined and perceived as a more impactful form of engagement, community engagement is viewed as secondary or operational. This perception risks undervaluing community engagement, even though community relationships are critical for long-term success, resilience and trust-building. In other words, when community engagement is seen as less strategic, organisations may overlook important insights from community stakeholders or fail to allocate adequate resources to foster genuine collaboration. As one interviewee puts it, 'Organisations that pursue their own policy agenda really gets stuck in my craw because it's taking advantage of people.'



"We have to be very careful that it doesn't become a type of engagement that people see as a manipulation. Especially if leaning towards political stakeholders when considering long-term engagement and trust."





Parallels to the complexities around the issue of social licence are clear. Like social licence, strategic engagement can result in resistance, distrust and obstacles to implementation, particularly when stakeholders feel excluded or unheard. Without a clear community mandate, projects risk delays, opposition or outright failure. In social licence, opacity fuels scepticism and backlash. In strategic engagement, ineffective relationship-building and a lack of transparency can weaken institutional relationships and undermine credibility. As one interviewee put it: '[Organisations] talk about, "We want to learn how to get social licence," or "We want to be very strategic with our social licence." But I have had participants say, "We don't want to participate in the research because we are concerned that if you figure this thing out" – and strategic engagement is comparable – "then these parties that we are struggling against, they will use this tool to manipulate us or they will use this tool against us".'

Comparing strategic engagement and social licence highlights concerns around its definition, particularly where core values and intentions of engagement principles risk being lost. This is particularly keen when looking at for-profit organisations. For instance,

an interviewee highlights: 'Some private sector companies that are doing major project development across the country, their number one legal duty is still to their shareholders and to their financial bottom line.' This can undermine the very intention of engagement practice for professionals: 'The whole idea is that we're doing engagement because we want better outcomes for communities. On the one hand, you do want to see that taken up into the C-suite because you want to have professional engagement practitioners at the table being able to assert the community view and also being able to raise concerns about things that might not otherwise receive attention.' But, like social licence, while ostensibly community-led, if used to further a political agenda or motivation, it can be at the expense of community collaboration and ownership. 'It's very similar with social licence. On the one hand, social licence can be a very powerful community-led tool to assert community voice and authority over a particular project or policy or initiative. At the same time, if it is used strategically by governments or companies wanting to assert their own agendas, they can claim social licence in a way that is disempowering to communities.'



To be sure, politics differs from strategy. However, the mistrust around the definition of strategic engagement rests on political intention: 'That's where my concern comes in. Because the kind of usage that I'm talking about is strategy for political gain. When a major project in your area is part of a political campaign, or it's a ministerial announcement, or it's been part of a political agenda, what do you think about the engagement that goes along with those projects? Once a project is politicised in any of these ways, communities do not believe that the engagement around that project is genuine. They do not believe that their feedback on the project will result in any meaningful change. They believe that politicians have far too much influence in project selection, and that projects are chosen not because they are what's best for their communities, but they are what the politicians believe will give them political gain.'

The challenge, then, is defining strategic engagement in a way that carries notions of principles of engagement. That is, how the public can trust that strategic engagement as genuine engagement. As one interviewee reveals, 'When people have been through a consultation process and they've actually invested their trust in the process, to have that then just turned on its head to meet political outcomes does the opposite. It makes people withdraw their engagement and withdraw their trust, which, in a community that doesn't have a lot of trust, makes everyone's job a lot harder.'

If it lacks a clear definition, strategic engagement risks becoming a vague catch-all and open to interpretation. Strategic engagement ideally creates meaningful, reciprocal relationships between organisations and their stakeholders. However, when the purpose, parameters and ethical boundaries are not clearly articulated, the practice can easily be skewed toward achieving organisational goals at the expense of authentic engagement. Without a shared understanding of what constitutes ethical engagement, too, there is a risk that

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practitioners may unwittingly contribute to tokenistic or extractive practices, where stakeholders are engaged only to validate predetermined outcomes. This approach not only undermines trust but also erodes the legitimacy of engagement processes in the eyes of communities and stakeholders. Furthermore, the lack of a defining framework leaves practitioners vulnerable to competing pressures, such as delivering measurable outcomes or aligning with organisational priorities. In such cases, the focus can shift away from fostering genuine dialogue toward achieving short-term objectives.

'Faux engagement'

'We've had so many examples of bad proposals that have come from bad consultation. And that just leads to bad blood in the community and then you've got to go and try and fix it.'

'If you distance people, don't involve them, treat them like a mushroom, then you're setting yourself up to be resisted by them when you decide what you want to do.'

Poor consultation weakens the foundation of strategic engagement. It reduces it to a superficial, often short-term project-by-project approach rather than a deliberate,





long-term approach to building trust in democratic processes. Without meaningful participation and responsiveness, strategic engagement risks becoming a transactional process, undermining its purpose of shaping sustainable relationships and informed decision-making. Poor engagement in a government context can stem from, among other things, lack of transparency; top-down decision-making; insufficient resources; tokenistic or tick-the-box consultation; and failure to address community concerns – all leading to distrust and disengagement as I have outlined previously in relation to community influence in decision-making and sustainable ESG practices.

However, a causal relationship exists between poor consultation and the failure to prioritise engagement in a government context, especially with senior decision-makers and political leaders: ‘If you’re looking at trying to craft a solution to a thorny issue, you want to engage early so that people don’t feel like they’re being included in a process where a whole bunch of decisions have been made without their involvement.’ While the failure to prioritise engagement can lead to missed opportunities for input and entrenched opposition, it also produces reactive rather than proactive communication, with decisions being perceived as predetermined: ‘The challenge with not starting early is that quite often processes get underway in all sorts of ways and then you start to involve others down the track. And that can lead to real problems. Unless it’s hardwired in that you’re going to undertake engagement very early, you can often get caught up in all sorts of other things and it can be too late or, at the very least, later than ideal.’

This leads to what one interviewee called

‘performative consultation processes’ that exist across government levels in Australia and New Zealand. Outsourced consultation often prioritises checking a compliance box over meaningful dialogue, leading to decisions shaped by unrepresentative voices rather than those most affected: ‘When you don’t engage properly with communities – which is where we often find ourselves, not from our own doing but from corporations or consultants who are acting on behalf of government, who are given the task of signing off that they consulted – often they don’t know how to engage with the community. The people they’ve spoken to are not the ones who are directly affected, or they’re given a lot more to a noisy minority who has a particular agenda than they have actually given to the broader community.’

This is particularly acute in regional electorates where decisions around engagement and proposals are resourced centrally. Government consultations that reflect a regional/centre divide, where decisions overlook local contexts and voices, fail to ensure that diverse, community-specific insights shape policy outcomes: ‘We need to make this a legislative priority to ensure that when someone claims they have engaged with a community, they have met at least a minimum standard.’ This not only affects resource allocation but presents a call to embed requirements of minimum standards: ‘By the time money goes into bad consultation, it is then followed by more money trying to rectify it – which has happened just so many times.’ As this interviewee reveals, the repeated cycle of poor consultation – misallocating resources, delaying meaningful outcomes and making future consultation more difficult and contentious – followed by costly attempts



to fix it, undermines trust and weakens future engagement efforts.

Here, the process of faux consultation compounds issues around urban-centric policies that marginalise regions through the formal appearance of engagement processes: 'A lot of work is generated when engagement and consultation with communities is not done well. So, we get through the "faux consultation", then we get to the point where our project's going to be funded and all of a sudden people come out of the woodwork and say, "Hang on, you didn't talk to me. You didn't understand what my concerns are". And that generates a lot of churn and a lot of work to actually go back to community. It often looks [to community] like you're trying to be a handbrake on everything, but the problem is we didn't do it right at the front end.'

Ignoring 'policy in the bush', as one interviewee put it, this becomes even more complicated when urban-centric decisions are marketed to the region: 'Often a decision is made, they'll go out and try and market the decision and say, "Well, I think it's a great idea". It's the opposite of engaging with the community.' And, while the frequency of this occurring across government levels is concerning, even more troubling is the misallocation of resources to decisions that have already been made: 'It's really common that with state and federal governments. They'll even start working on a quantum of funds that they'd need to fund their decision on the basis that they already know they're not going to consider anything else.'

The challenge of faux consultation exacerbates disparities, as decisions made without genuine regional participation fail to address localised needs, reinforcing fragmented governance and perpetuating the urban-rural policy rift. It also fails to address the realities of regional communities. (Some regions in Australia take in over a hundred communities and localities across a single electorate. For instance, Barwon, New South Wales's largest electoral district, has 13 local government councils.) In addition, there are communities comprising

varying levels of literacy skills and limitations to digital accessibility, with some groups requiring only face-to-face engagement. Digital exclusion in regional communities affects diverse groups, particularly Indigenous communities and, according to a [2025 report](#), rural women who are among one of the most digitally excluded groups.

Examples of decision-makers 'changing the goalposts', where departments 'proceed regardless', speak to what an interviewee referred to as a 'slightly more cynical take that, at the departmental level, often the culture is extraordinarily top down.' The state government's unilateral revision of the Wilcannia Weir design in regional New South Wales, Australia, for example, engendered strong community reaction, citing a lack of consultation and transparency, resulting in public protests, a parliamentary motion, and suspension of the project pending an [independent review](#). While the community felt a promise had been broken, the controversy also underscores tensions between infrastructure planning at a government level and Indigenous community and culture. It further indicates a stifled tier of government in a disconnected environment. As one interviewee put it: 'Senior public servants who don't live in regional areas, their input into decision-making won't be through the lens of somebody who actually understands the region.'

The expertise gap

'A lot of the people who need to undertake engagement aren't engagement experts and they just don't know the gamut of who they should be engaging with and how.'

'Government departments are aware they're not doing engagement well and there is a genuine appetite to do better.'

'I know people who work in this space, who try to help governments and corporates work through big processes, but it seems to me it is its own specialist area and, for a big organisation, that does raise the question as to whether they have enough skills in that area.'



When decision-makers lack engagement expertise, they often view it as a late-stage compliance step rather than a strategic function, leading to engagement happening too late to meaningfully shape decisions.

When decision-makers lack engagement expertise, they often view it as a late-stage compliance step rather than a strategic function, leading to engagement happening too late to meaningfully shape decisions. This reinforces a top-down approach where communities are seen as stakeholders to be managed. As a result, communities are treated as recipients of decisions and engagement is deprioritised relative to policy outcomes: 'They certainly do not prioritise it to the same extent as they want their policy outcome, they want their infrastructure or energy outcome, and I think that is a real shame.' In addition to this, being elected is often seen as, if not equivalent to, then a substitute for engagement, short-changing continuous dialogue with communities: 'Unfortunately, at the political level, they think that they do engage well because they've been elected and, therefore, they're great at engaging their communities. But they actually don't know the technical skills of the profession, and therefore, they make assumptions about it. And when they're the one sitting in the hot seat, they'll continue to consider engagement as something that is lesser than the outcomes of the project itself.'

Being 'terrified of feedback' leads to both a reluctance to engage and a belief that avoiding engagement is a way of 'protecting the institution': 'Being elected, they're actually blocked from properly being able to engage with their communities because they're often terrified. Right from the moment they take their

seat – and this is the most ambitious part to me – they start to believe their job is to defend the institution. It's endemic.' But while fear of feedback prevents understanding engagement methods and principles, there is also a lack of knowledge of engagement expertise: 'If you're developing a policy, you might be an expert in taxation policy or you might be an expert in renewable policy, but does that mean that you're in a good position to think through how you would go into a regional area and engage with a whole bunch of landholders around how a transmission wire is going to affect them? And would you be any good at it, even if it occurred to you that these are important stakeholders?'

This is not to suggest that political stakeholders do not seek to actively understand and map communities, as well as identify relevant and interested stakeholders in decision-making and policy development. Politicians, as one interviewee states, 'often become pretty good at coming up with a stakeholder grid': 'Because part of our job is to try and figure out all the various parties who have an interest, but trying to figure out where their starting position might be, what their interests are and trying to think through it in a systematic way.' But political stakeholders can lack clarity on the scope of potential interactions and methods of engagement. They are uncertain about whom they should engage with and how to do so, despite some being 'good at it.'



Fear of feedback, combined with rising community expectations, can also create misunderstandings about what engagement entails for all stakeholders.

As one interviewee explains:

'Some public service agencies are pretty good at it. For example, Parliamentary Committees are often effective. At the start of major inquiries, they try to compile extensive stakeholder lists, reaching out to all committee members for input. When they open the process for submissions, they actively engage major stakeholders, proactively encouraging them to contribute.' However, many agencies, individuals, and organisations are not proficient in engagement: 'They often get well into a process without a clear understanding of the full range of interested parties – let alone the nuanced ways in which they should engage with them differently.'

Political blowback often centres on claims of inadequate community consultation or engagement, which are valid concerns. However, two key issues emerge: first, whether such criticisms serve as a proxy for broader opposition to the project itself, and second, what kind of engagement politicians or stakeholders actually expect. While the phrase 'engagement was done fully' is often used casually, it serves to obscure whether the engagement was meaningful or aligned with community expectations. This gap in understanding the methods and principles of engagement is, as one interviewee reveals, 'something missing from the discourse at the political level.'

Fear of feedback, combined with rising community expectations, can also create misunderstandings about what engagement entails for all stakeholders. As one interviewee noted: 'There are different levels of engagement and consultation, but people often expect consultation to mean full participation – that they'll be asked what they want, rather than simply informed of decisions. Many assume consultation means presenting a plan, collecting feedback, and making changes based on that input. But in some cases, that's not how engagement is designed to function.' This lack of clarity – both in political discussions and within institutions – undermines effective engagement, leading to mismatched expectations and reinforcing public scepticism. Added to this, lack of expertise, on the one hand, and fear of feedback and political blowback, on the other, creates a gridlock against understanding strategic engagement and leads to what's commonly referred to as 'cookie-cutter engagement': 'Ultimately, people at the political level believe what works generally for federal governments should work for local governments in the very broad sense, but they're missing some ingredients. You've got to have a way that the community has ownership because if you just go and say we're just going to pick that up and drop it into another community, that won't work.'

The inability to effectively reach diverse populations, build trust, and adapt to local contexts exposes gaps in government expertise. To be sure, this realisation is pushing government agencies to adopt more dynamic, inclusive and responsive approaches to engagement, where current best practices emphasise a shift towards more collaborative and participatory models of engagement. For instance, *The Australian Public Service Framework for Engagement and Participation* now advocates for 'deliberate' and 'collaborative' engagements, moving beyond mere consultation to shared decision-making processes. This also challenges the notion of strategic engagement as an organisation-centric process. The ability to leverage digital



platforms and analyse complex stakeholder data is further becoming a crucial component of strategic engagement expertise, where the recognition of poor engagement practices has also led to a greater focus on accountability and measurable outcomes. Government agencies are now expected to demonstrate the impact of their engagement efforts, challenging the notion that strategic engagement can be effective without tangible, community-centred results.

However, there is a tendency for engagement expertise to be confined to midlevel practitioners, with senior decision-makers often lacking the depth of understanding needed to integrate engagement into policy and institutional strategy. This results in a disconnect where engagement is viewed as a procedural necessity rather than a means to enhance public trust, legitimacy and long-term decision-making. Lack of engagement literacy among decision-makers leads to engagement being framed in transactional rather than relational terms; that is, focused on risk management, compliance or consultation rather than co-creation and participatory governance, for instance.

Without a shift in leadership perspectives, engagement remains reactive rather than strategic or embedded into the institutional culture of decision-making. When engagement practitioners are forced to use rigid institutional language that does not connect with communities, it reveals a fundamental disconnect between government and the realities of meaningful engagement. 'All levels of governments communicate poorly with communities, and it's probably the most frustrating for a community to not be aware of what a level of government is doing, what programs are in place, what they're trying to achieve. And that's won by communication.' Bureaucratic, technical or compliance-driven language further prioritises internal processes over public understanding, signalling that engagement is being treated as a formal requirement rather than a means of fostering genuine relationships. And, when engagement practitioners are limited to institutional language, it suggests that government is

more focused on controlling narratives than enabling dialogue.

Engagement fragmentation

'If it's about political stakeholders, well, that's probably political engagement, isn't it?'

'Strategic engagement is about looking ahead to what's coming down the line, and the engagement that we have with government is often politically directed.'

'There's advocacy for how you get different perspectives into decision-making, not necessarily advocating for a particular discipline. So, it's like, "Oh, you must have an engagement professional in the room to have a smarter decision." Well, that's a red rag to a bull for a decision-maker, right?'

Elevating the value of decision-making brings into focus current views around engagement professionalisation. This presents a flip side to the gap in expertise, where the notion of engagement and its advocacy has evolved into a specialised profession with its own frameworks, methodologies and practices. While this expertise is valuable, it can inadvertently create barriers between engagement professionals and decision-makers who may see engagement as a separate discipline rather than a leadership responsibility: 'If it's around the value of understanding different perspectives and really investigating them, do engagement professionals bring something that we hadn't thought of? How does that strengthen decisions that we're making? That's different to, "I need to advocate for engagement professionals and their role in decision-making".'

Here, the fragmentation of engagement weakens its strategic potential. This reinforces a disconnected approach to governance and decision-making. For, when engagement is confined to specialised teams or compliance functions, it becomes procedural rather than transformative and potentially detached from the broader institutional frameworks that shape public trust and policy legitimacy. Like the use of institutional language





with communities, as mentioned above, it fosters a closed discourse. In addition, where engagement professionals speak in technical terms that do not translate across government, industry or community sectors, it can limit engagement's ability to influence institutional culture and reinforce its role as a driver of strategic outcomes rather than an operational necessity: 'It's a bit like saying gender plays a card in the C-suite, or government or business plays a card in the C-suite. It's limiting, if that's the only way you think about it, because of the technical competency or your gender or your background. It's actually how you look at decision-making that counts.'

Discussions about engagement often focus on the need for engagement professionals to be present in decision-making spaces, but the challenge is ensuring that all professionals – regardless of their discipline – embrace a broader, more inclusive perspective. As one interviewee puts it: 'When I hear, "Engagement people need to be in the room", I think, "What if there is an engagement person?" It's not just engagement professionals; it could be any profession, right? You could have an engineer working alongside engagement professionals who feel that engineers don't listen to them. But just as an engineer might focus too narrowly on design, engagement professionals can also become overly fixated on their own priorities. When any profession operates in isolation, they risk missing the richness of broader perspectives that they need to take into consideration.'

The need for a clear strategy to deliver value and 'smarter decision-making' by incorporating all available information also

acknowledges a fundamental challenge: While community engagement is essential, it does not automatically override other considerations, such as cost, safety or environmental impact. This pushes back against the idea that engagement should dictate outcomes rather than inform them. This critique raises an implicit contradiction: Is engagement framed as a competing interest or an integrative process? 'What's the strategy to deliver value? What's the strategy to deliver smarter decision-making with all of the information, with everything that you can possibly build into decision-making up front? Not everything has equal weight at every stage of a project. Community doesn't override cost, cost doesn't override safety, safety doesn't override environment – they all have a part to play. I think engagement people present the community as outweighing all those other factors.'

However, the role of engagement in evidence-based decision-making reinforces it as a tool for gathering data and evidence, which strengthens decision-making. The 'controversial' idea that engagement effectiveness is not necessarily tied to the number of engagement professionals involved – that is, having more engagement practitioners automatically leads to better engagement outcomes – suggests that strategic application of engagement matters more. 'The value of decision-making is making decisions with as much evidence and information as you can. Engagement as an activity gives you more evidence, more data, more information to make smarter decision-making. The controversial part is that you could have 100 engagement professionals or you could have one.'



The key issue here is the distinction between engagement as an activity and engagement as a strategic function. If engagement is merely seen as gathering input, then its influence may be limited to data collection. However, if engagement is recognised as a strategic lever that enhances decision-making, then its value lies in how well it is embedded into governance, planning and risk assessment – not in how many engagement professionals are in the room. ‘There’s an interesting dynamic in the engagement profession. The first generation – before engagement was even recognised as a profession – was used to insisting, “We must, we must! Engagement is important!” Then came the middle generation, articulating that we were not just pure engagement professionals but bringing the value of strategic engagement into decision-making. Now we have a large next generation of engagement professionals, many of whom are used to working with big teams to deliver projects. But are they actually making better decisions?’

On the one hand, we are mapping out the profession’s transformation – from early advocates who had to fight for engagement to be recognised, to a middle generation that worked to embed engagement into strategic decision-making, to a newer generation that operates within established structures but may not be questioning whether those structures actually lead to better outcomes. On the other hand, asking, ‘Are they actually making better decisions?’, suggests that simply having large teams and formalised processes does not automatically equate to meaningful or effective engagement. There’s also an implied concern that engagement may have become procedural rather than strategic: ‘Better for whom? If it’s an infrastructure project, the community around it? Or is it better for the next 30 years of city development? Who do you decide benefits from these hard decisions? Does this make for a better, a richer, more productive, more sustainable community and city in 12 months’ time? In 12 years’ time?’

The contrast between generations of engagement suggests that while the fight for engagement’s legitimacy has largely been won, the challenge now is ensuring that it adds real value rather than just existing as a compliance measure. The underlying message here might be that as engagement becomes more institutionalised through strategic engagement, there’s a risk of losing its strategic edge. That is, the first generation fought for recognition, the second pushed for integration into decision-making, and the third risks assuming that engagement’s presence alone is enough, without ensuring that it actually leads to smarter decisions. ‘If you only see decisions through one lens – whether engagement, engineering or environment – you miss the bigger picture. It’s about defining the problem first. What are our options? Can we afford them? How do we build buy-in? Too often, people skip the problem and jump to justifying a solution. But whatever discipline you bring to the decision-making table, if the only way you look at that decision is through that lens, you’ll never convince them of the value.’

Engaging in an era of mis- and disinformation:

‘Engagement has even more of a role to play as a trusted provider of evidence and information to support community decision-making. Because right now we’re seeing information enter into communities through misinformation.’

While false and misleading information is not a new phenomenon – often attributed to the 2016 US Presidential election and Brexit referendum – its prevalence has surged in the past decade. Misinformation researchers have revealed that effective democracies rely on evidence-based discourse and informed citizens, and increasingly recognise the seriousness of the problem: the rise in populist and polarising political movements and the troubling moral choice of acquiescence in an information environment. That we live in a or a ‘misinformation age’ suggests that constructing and sustaining misperceptions leads to knowledge resistance. This, in turn, poses significant





threats to individual and community well-being as well as democratic processes. Media literacy is a potential mitigating factor. For while there are various views on the level of knowledge citizens in democracies should have, there is widespread agreement that democracy functions more effectively and representation improves when citizens are well-informed about politics and society.⁸ The current reduction of local media in Australia and New Zealand, too, weakens democratic processes by diminishing access to diverse independent news and reducing coverage of local issues, making it harder for communities to engage with and understand decision-making. As one interviewee stresses, 'The reduction of local news content and local media has been detrimental to understanding and the two-way sharing of opinions and education about decision-making.' Filter bubbles, too, confirm bias and lead to highly politicised political environments where we become confidently ignorant of the scale and complexity of the acute and chronic threats to democracy.

Indeed, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 identifies misinformation and disinformation as posing the most significant short-term or immediate threat globally, with recent research projects, such as the Disinformation in the City, tackling challenges posed by disinformation at local levels. Concerns are also heightened by the potential misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) to disseminate false narratives, which can erode public trust. Although, with the

recent withdrawal of the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024 (Misinformation Bill) introduced by the federal Parliament in Australia, it has been argued that misinformation can be a symptom as much as a cause of distrust. Particularly where a misinformation regime may cause more false beliefs and serve to reinforce confirmation bias while depending singularly on the very idea of institutional trust. For a misinformation regime to be effective, as one researcher put it, 'you need to really trust the government body'. Absolute trust in a single source of information can generate distrust, where a misinformation regime, in fact, weakens civic responsibility with direct democratic consequences.

More stridently, disinformation erodes the foundations upon which meaningful engagement is built. For instance, misinformation campaigns in the referendum on the Voice to Parliament in Australia, particularly on social media platforms, played a key role in shaping public perceptions, leveraging fear-based messaging and emotional narratives to amplify confusion and division. The prevalence of disinformation also necessitates a critical examination of the mechanisms through which engagement is legitimised, which are difficult to correct once internalised. For when false narratives gain traction, they shape public opinion and can lead to disengagement, polarisation or outright rejection of engagement processes. As one interviewee states, 'This may be

⁸For instance, well-informed citizens are usually more accepting of democratic norms such as tolerance, exhibit greater political interest and higher rates of political participation, and a greater likelihood to have opinions about pressing issues. See Broda, Elen and Jesper Strömbäck (2024), 'Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary, Systematic Literature Review', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, Volume 48, Issue 2, June.



more of the case overseas than here at the moment, but we're not immune to the types of disinformation and misinformation that can then lead to really difficult situations in community division.'

In addition, demographically, Australian communities are changing. As one interviewee highlights: 'How do you engage with super diverse Australian communities? These are communities where there are 25 or more different language ethnic groups within one LGA [local government agency], which is now, actually, the norm across all Australian capital cities – all qualify as super diverse. How do you engage people when we do have super diversity?'

The dynamics of disinformation create an asymmetrical challenge for engagement practitioners. While engagement is often designed to be iterative, deliberative and inclusive, disinformation thrives on speed, emotional appeal and cognitive biases. The rapid dissemination of false or misleading information outpaces the slower, more deliberative processes of engagement, creating a landscape where reactive responses to disinformation often fall short. This can undermine the ability of engagement to effectively counter false narratives before they become embedded in public consciousness: 'It's a wicked problem, because there's no easy answer. You've got people who don't have good intentions using false information, which is easy to digest, and it's always good when you can paint someone to be a bad guy and point to them and say, "It's their fault", as opposed to trying to explain information because people don't want to hear it.'

While digital engagement tools have expanded the reach and inclusivity of strategic engagement practices, they have also created new vulnerabilities. This complicates efforts to elevate engagement as a meaningful

democratic practice, as the very platforms used to foster participation may also facilitate the spread of disinformation that undermines it. The challenge, then, is not merely one of counteracting disinformation but of rethinking the digital architectures through which engagement is mediated.⁹

In addition, while knowledge resistance undermines public trust, it also fuels conspiracy theories.¹⁰ This can show up unexpectedly; for instance, information that disrupts efforts to build trust and consensus around urban planning initiatives. As one interviewee highlights: 'One of the biggest challenges that has been faced recently has been a conspiracy theory around 20-kilometre cities.' That is, '20-kilometre cities' where 'everything that you need, you should be able to access within 24 metres of your home': 'The conspiracy theory is that this planning development is a mechanism of government to control people by keeping them within a small space. This is actually a problem because now, when we are trying to institute these strategies, there are people who are pushing back against them, saying, "Oh, this is a new form of government control".'

Widespread disillusionment with institutions can also make it difficult to build authentic engagement. Decision-makers may view engagement as a risk rather than a value-adding process, fearing backlash or misinterpretation. In addition, stakeholders might dismiss engagement efforts as performative.

⁹ However, a major challenge in studying misinformation and disinformation is conceptual ambiguity. Scholars use multiple overlapping terms – such as 'fake news,' 'propaganda,' and 'malinformation' – sometimes inconsistently.

¹⁰ Misinformation-driven polarisation, such as the belief that the 2020 U.S. election was 'stolen,' is one example of how false narratives can disrupt democratic processes and institutional trust.





Policymakers may be reluctant to embed strategic engagement because it can expose them to scrutiny or slow down decision-making. The rise of misinformation and digital echo chambers complicates efforts to engage meaningfully, as trust in sources varies widely. Decision-makers and organisations may struggle to control narratives around engagement, particularly if they are perceived as self-serving, and especially where AI-driven content can distort public perception, requiring more effort to validate engagement findings and processes.



REBUILDING LEGITIMACY

Strategic engagement is increasingly critical to navigating complex decision-making environments, yet its value is often underestimated or misunderstood. Challenges such as policy-focused engagement, poor practice, urban/city policy rift and widespread professionalisation and engagement specialisation that, among other things, has led to the lack of government expertise in the extreme, all work to create inconsistent integration of engagement into governance structures. Responding to these challenges means reframing engagement as a core strategic function – one that directly contributes to better decisions, risk mitigation and institutional trust.

This section sets out targeted recommendations to address how to raise understanding and awareness of the value of strategic engagement among decision-makers to improve trust in democratic processes, in two parts. The first focuses on strengthening practice with 12 key recommendations. By extension, the second offers ways for practitioners to elevate strategic engagement's visibility and influence – making the case for its contribution at senior and decision-making levels.

Building trust is not just an outcome of engagement, but a condition for its success. As public trust in institutions continues to decline, and democracy is under threat, strategic engagement offers a credible pathway to rebuild legitimacy *for and by* institutions. By creating transparency, responding to communities' lived experience, and informing decisions, engagement moves from the perceived margins to the centre of organisational purpose and policy. Strategic engagement, then, becomes essential to how decision-makers lead.

Recommendations for Engagement Practice

Establish a standardised definition and framework

Establish a standardised framework for genuine strategic engagement to ensure it is clearly defined and safeguarded from dilution or misuse and does not become a mistrusted term. Both practitioners and engagement research should work towards defining what genuine strategic engagement entails with a national peak body overseeing its development, setting standards, best practices and evaluation frameworks. The framework should articulate core principles and key components to build trust, consistency and efficacy across sectors. This would guide decision-makers, and ensure engagement is integrated into policy effectively. The Engagement Institute should consider co-designing a clear definition of strategic engagement with diverse stakeholders to maintain integrity and avoid misuse and manipulation.

'I think precise language can help, but what's more helpful is a discrete definition to accompany it. When someone might use engagement for consultation or even comms somewhat interchangeably, that is unhelpful. But what can really bring strategic engagement more into line and ensure that we have consistency across the page is a much more easy-to-digest definition.'

'For strategic engagement to be powerful and useful, it will require a level of thinking and commitment. Unless that kind of work happens, you risk what could be a very helpful notion becoming one that is seen as a weasel word and losing trust and efficacy.'





Co-design with political stakeholders

Involve diverse stakeholders, including political leaders, local councils and community groups to focus on holistic, comprehensive approaches that bring politicians into meaningful discussions with local stakeholders – ideally in a bipartisan manner – to avoid politicisation that can undermine trust in engagement processes. If strategic engagement fosters inclusive, cross-party dialogue, it can support community visioning and help overcome challenges associated with political influence.

'Politicians need to be informing what strategic engagement looks like from an engagement perspective. Because, ideally, this would be a holistic and a comprehensive approach, which maybe brings politicians into discussion with local stakeholders in a meaningful way. There's an opportunity to overcome some of the challenges that we see around politicisation leading to a view that the engagement can't be genuine. If, for instance, strategic engagement is about a place-based discussion between the key players, including politicians – and, ideally, you'd have the politicians from both sides participating – then you could come to a place where strategic engagement supports community visioning.'

'If we're talking about long-term visioning of communities, then what we're talking about is setting the expectations, defining the key stakeholders and setting the parameters of what a community says they would like to achieve. Then, ideally, policymakers would respond to that. Do you have the policymakers in the room while those conversations are happening?'

Create a multifaceted approach to government engagement

The persistent misconception that engagement slows down projects despite its critical role in project success requires adopting a multifaceted approach to shift perception, including advocacy at all government levels, deeper engagement at the departmental level, and improved private sector practices. Industry leaders and advocates who represent industry should ensure stakeholder engagement is a deliberate and essential part of project planning and a core component of a project's strategy. Strategic engagement requires industry representatives to embed stakeholder collaboration into project planning to align interests and achieve impactful results. That is, integrate engagement into strategic project design rather than treating it as a last-minute step.

'Unfortunately, a perception persists. Only recently a politician said, "Well, doesn't engagement slow down projects?" That was a disappointing thing to hear from someone whom we would expect to know better. In terms of shifting the dial, there's a couple of ways to do that. One is the work of the Engagement Institute in terms of ongoing, consistent, advocacy on federal and state governments to elevate awareness and understanding. It is also up to the industry proponents themselves. Most of these are fairly sophisticated operators. They should know better. And they should know that engagement is critically important for the success of their project. But realistically, the private sector itself needs to do better with this and needs to ensure that they actually clock themselves, even if they're not given the



directive from government. They should bake engagement into the strategic level of their own project design and implementation as opposed to the final few steps before putting the shovel down.'

Share real-world outcomes – good and bad – with industry leaders

Showcasing the consequences of inadequate engagement empowers advocates with evidence to improve engagement practices. Engagement practice needs to be more strategic and proactive – especially in major infrastructure projects where early and meaningful engagement is essential to prevent community opposition and project disruption. Actively showcasing successful engagement cases – including directly to industry leaders – can influence better practices and embed strategic engagement. Additionally, empowering engagement professionals with the tools and evidence needed to push for stronger internal advocacy stresses the importance of identifying and elevating examples of successful engagement to industry leaders to push for better engagement practices at a strategic level.

'The easiest example, in Australia, is the energy transmission lines for the Renewable Energy Transmission Transition. In a lot of places, it seems to be the unfortunate case where engagement hasn't happened at the strategic level and communities have been offside, and the project has been disrupted as a result. But there's also other evidence of when engagement has gone well – and it's about ensuring that this evidence is elevated to industry. That could mean Engagement Institute executives going directly to some of the large industry proponents, the large infrastructure providers, and providing that evidence to them. Many of them have members within their ranks as well, and it's about ensuring they are informed and given the best tools they need to perform their own internal advocacy for it.'

Improve accountability through accessible feedback

Enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of feedback by developing clear, digestible methods for assessing and improving consultation processes to address the challenges of poor engagement. This includes providing structured guidance on identifying poor consultation practices and offering practical recommendations for improvement. Practitioners and organisations, particularly government organisations, must adopt clear, accessible methods for identifying what worked and what didn't, avoiding vague directives without offering practical support. There is a role for Engagement Institute and industry bodies to provide leadership in demystifying poor practice.

'Awareness of the standards themselves is not as high as it needs to be. There needs to be a digestible way of pointing out what could be done better with those engagement processes that isn't just saying "read the standard" – though they should read the standard, obviously. There needs to be a much more accessible way to deliver that feedback.'

'What I'd really like to see – and potentially as a role for Engagement Institute – is identifying what was wrong with the engagement and how we can really simply explain what was wrong with it and what could have been done better.'

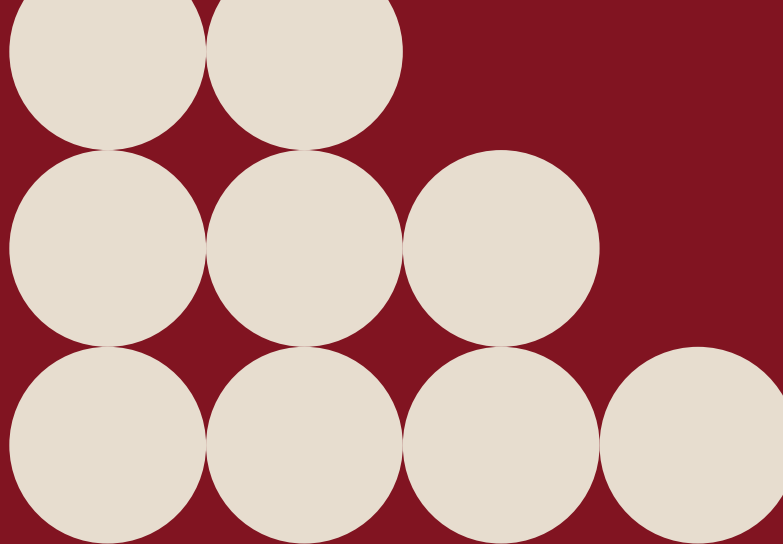
Reframe business imperative

By quantifying its value in terms of avoided costs and improved community buy-in, and linking it to risk mitigation, strategic engagement can command the seriousness it deserves within executive and political circles. Reframing engagement as core corporate competency, one that directly impacts project outcomes, financial performance and risk profiles, further legitimises its value.

'Engagement Institute should be showing leadership on the idea of the well-rounded engagement corporate professional. Framing



Building trust is not just an outcome of engagement, but a condition for its success. As public trust in institutions continues to decline, and democracy is under threat, strategic engagement offers a credible pathway to rebuild legitimacy for and by institutions.



engagement as a risk-mitigation strategy seems really critical in elevating engagement and getting people to take it seriously. Point out the money saved at a national level – there are studies suggesting projects held up due to poor communication and lack of community buy-in have cost billions. That’s really shocking, and it should be taken seriously. I find that pointing to the hard arguments – dollar value, risk mitigation, the things corporate and political leaders take seriously – is one way to relate the value of strategic engagement. [Political stakeholders] don’t always take the softer policy merits seriously on their own. You need to make it clear why this matters to them.’

Early evaluation in government engagement

‘You’ve got to have discussions of deep engagement with all stakeholders from the very start.’

Strategic engagement requires ongoing, transparent evaluation that begins at project inception – not post hoc. Embedding evaluation mechanisms into government engagement processes ensures transparency, continuous improvement and accountability. Effective evaluation should be seen as a built-in component of and crucial for producing valid data, drawing out lessons learned, and improving long-term project outcomes.

‘In terms of thinking through how you would raise the value of strategic engagement, if we think about the other end of the process – the evaluation of a policy, you need to start

thinking about that from the get-go. You can’t implement a policy and then, a year later, say, “How are we going to evaluate it?” Because if you want to evaluate it properly, you need to figure out how do we actually collect all the data right from the start.’

‘In the case of evaluation, the question is, should there be some processes where, from the outset, you hardwire it into the process of strategic engagement?’

Embed systematic and transparent practice

Strategic engagement should be integrated across policy areas to meet growing expectation for transparency and consultation in decision-making processes, whether in government or corporate sectors. To meet these expectations, organisations should adopt systematic approaches that include documenting activities to ensure accountability and transparency in concert with analysis that reviews how final decisions reflect engagement strategies, even if causation between engagement and outcomes cannot be definitively proven.

‘Most areas of policy benefit from engagement, as most have a degree of stakeholder or public interest. Over the last few decades, there has been a growing expectation for greater transparency in government, corporate and other decision-making. Organisations are increasingly expected not only to explain their decisions but also to consult along the way. An answer to this starts with systematically recording



the engagement process. It should also involve interviewing participants to determine whether they felt heard and whether their input had an impact on the outcome. Another layer might include analysing how the final outcome reflects different viewpoints.'

Integrate technology

Strategic engagement requires leveraging digital tools to inform decision-making at the highest levels. For example, AI-powered sentiment analysis and visualisation tools can gather evidence to enable leaders to act on clear, evidence-based stakeholder feedback rather than assumptions. However, for engagement to function at a strategic level, technology must be integrated into governance frameworks and aligned with organisational intent. This includes ensuring that regional and remote communities have equitable access to participation, fostering inclusivity in strategy development rather than relying solely on digital solutions.

'There would be first generation and 'purest' engagement people who would derive the fact that you can only do consultation face-to-face. But actually, we delivered a very rich engagement program with the community during COVID by using every technology that we could think of. With things like AI, being able to do sentiment analysis faster – it's verifying it rather than it being on 'gut feel' all the time. So, if I'm an advocate for evidence leads to better decision-making, then I think some of that technology is helping us take the dark art out of engagement and judgement on how communities feel about things.'

Use media

The role of media in strategic engagement allows organisations to raise issues and potentially influence public discourse. Being proactive in using a variety of media channels to communicate evidence underscores the importance of having an open, transparent approach to engagement, rather than just focusing on meeting engagement activity metrics. Public discourse is increasingly polarised, making it harder for decision-

makers to navigate complex issues. Deliberative, evidence-based engagement can help bridge divides, but ineffective processes – such as working groups without clear outcomes – often derail meaningful impact. Instead of relying solely on bureaucratic mechanisms, practitioners can use media strategically to surface key issues and shape public debates. Shaping narratives early ensures that engagement sets the terms of public debate before misinformation takes hold. Proactively framing issues with evidence and community voices, practitioners can pre-empt false or polarising narratives, keeping discussions grounded in fact and shared interests, and anchor discussions in fact, making it harder for misleading or divisive narratives to gain traction.

'We've demonised opposing sides, but through deliberative and evidence-based engagement, we can guide decision-makers – both political and otherwise – to see how communities can come together, compromise and inform policy, as they have in the past. But I've also seen this done very badly. Ministers will say, "Let's start a working group", and their KPI becomes the existence of the group rather than its outcomes. That's not effective engagement. Instead, I'd rather influence in a variety of ways, including using media to raise issues and push for solutions. Strategic engagement starts with a willingness to let communities shape central and local government decisions. In New Zealand, where there isn't a lot of thought leadership, it's easy to spark conversations through media and other groups. But taking a stand is vital – leaders need to be brave in proposing solutions. Many fear the media, but it's one of the best ways to influence politics. Politicians are market-driven; if you influence their market, they will respond.'

Clear, inclusive language and communication

'People try and make this stuff really sophisticated and, at the end of the day, it's just clear communication.'

Institutional language plays a crucial, often overlooked, role in shaping how engagement





is perceived, particularly government engagement. When language is hierarchical, technical or compliance-driven, engagement is reduced to a transactional step – detached from its relational, trust-building purpose. Conversely, when institutional language reflects shared governance principles – emphasising co-creation, mutual accountability and responsiveness – it signals a genuine commitment to participatory decision-making. This shift not only strengthens engagement at a strategic level, but also integrates it within core governance processes, reinforcing its value beyond process and into purpose. Ultimately, language is not neutral – it shapes power dynamics and reflects how governments see their relationship with the public. To elevate engagement as a strategic function, the language used must support legitimacy, trust and long-term relational governance.

'We fail to walk in the shoes of the people we're trying to influence or oppose. Understanding the outcomes that others are trying to achieve is something I would recommend everyone does.'

'Engagement with iwi is a good example where people know they have to get on the level and communicate in a special way. Considering the drivers of who you're trying to talk to and the things that motivate them is crucial. If you speak to an iwi group, you have to think about what's important to them and listen for those things. If we took that as a model for speaking to different communities, we'd probably end up better.'

Bridge region-city divide

Governments and practitioners must recognise that every community is unique. Policies and programs designed in major cities cannot simply be transplanted into regional or remote areas without local ownership and investment. Without genuine community input, even the most successful initiatives risk failure. Fostering ownership and implementation – when regional stakeholders are strategically involved in decision-making processes, community stakeholders are more likely to support and actively participate in the implementation of resulting initiatives.

'You've got to look at every community through its own lens – every community is unique, with its own needs. Governments based in major cities often see a successful program and think, "That looks great. We're going to pick that up and we're going to move it to another community". But, if there's no ownership and no investment from that community in that program, if the community doesn't feel like it's theirs or that they've had a say in it, then you're wasting your time.'

Advance engagement legislation

Legislation would allow for formal review or challenge of engagement quality, shifting engagement from discretionary to scrutinised and enforceable. A mandated 'review and redo' clause ensures that communities are meaningfully involved – engagement isn't just box-ticking, but open to validation. Legislation can institutionalise inclusive practices that deepen public investment in decision outcomes. Engagement without legislation is optional and inconsistent. While



practice – and practitioners – can't legislate, their lived expertise is key to defining good engagement as they are uniquely positioned at the intersection of practice, policy and democratic accountability. Legislating engagement can work to ensure minimum standards, protect rights of communities to be consulted, and create enforceable obligations to embed accountability.

'Legislation would require government agencies, corporations and consultants acting on behalf of the government to meet certain standards for community engagement. Legislation is aimed at addressing the common problem of "faux consultation" where decisions are made without genuine community input.'

'If someone says, "Hang on, the consultation process here hasn't been good", then it goes to the Minister. The Minister has to review the process and say either, "It's been okay" or "No, you're right, it hasn't been right – go back and do it again".'

Lead with transparency

'People make a decision and have a go at something and get it wrong and sit back and not make a decision at all. A lot are too scared to make a decision now and, in paralysis, they don't deliver because they're scared. I'd rather say, "If you get it wrong, you've learned something. You won't do it again and let's move on."'

Leaders must resist the paralysis of inaction caused by fear of backlash or getting it wrong. Instead, they should make clear, timely decisions – informed by community engagement – and communicate those decisions with transparency, even when the outcome may not fully align with all stakeholder views. Strategic engagement should be ongoing, purposeful and focused on building long-term trust, not just short-term approval. Leaders must embrace transparent, informed decision-making – communicating not just the outcomes, but the rationale, constraints and processes behind decisions.

'We make decisions – that's our job. We're

going to get some wrong. We make the best decisions with the information we have at the time. Sometimes you get more information later and think, "OK, I would've done that differently", but you just have to be open and cop it on the chin.'

'My view is that the average, reasonable person understands what you're doing and will accept what you're doing if you explain it to them... even the thought process you've gone through to get to the decision you're making. Not everyone will like it, but at least they appreciate you've gone through a process.'

Balance engagement and political cycles

Strategic engagement requires long-term relationship-building, but political stakeholders often operate on short, reactive cycles. Strategic engagement must balance these tensions by embedding engagement as a sustained practice rather than a response to shifting political pressures. This means understanding political realities without becoming entangled in them – focusing on operational needs while ensuring engagement remains a core part of governance.

'Political rhythms shape strategic engagement. Where senior political stakeholders work on 24-hour cycles, engagement practitioners often think in 24-month timelines. I like to see things realised – not just pushed and pulled by whatever is in the media today.'

'Double-guessing politics can be a trap. I'm aware of politics, but my job isn't to worry about party dynamics. Too often, people try to predict political moves without fully grasping what's actually happening.'



Recommendations for Engagement Practitioners

Clarify intent and cultivate transparency

Help leaders articulate purpose and scope from the outset.

Support communication to ensure decisions already made and scope for influence

Equip leaders with tools and language to explain why decisions are made (especially when feedback isn't adopted).

Help decision-makers frame messaging to show integrity and transparency.

Build in public understanding about the roles and responsibilities of government.

Adapt communication strategies to context

Tailor communication to community needs, especially in remote or historically excluded areas, to ensure inclusivity and relevance.

Prioritise simplicity in messaging.

Adapt communication strategies based on cultural or regional differences.

Promote cross-sector collaboration

Build a shared, relational vocabulary across government and industry that enhances strategic alignment.

Elevate evidence of successful engagement

Publicise engagement successes and demonstrate value and impact.

Gather case studies of where poor engagement led to project delays, community resistance or cost overruns.

Identify and promote examples where strategic engagement improved outcomes, trust and project efficiency.

Align engagement with political rhythms

Recognise political stakeholders work on rapid cycles. Design engagement strategies that acknowledge this while maintaining long-term goals.

Stay informed about political drivers.

Focus on operational and structural engagement needs rather than second-guessing political manoeuvring.

Ensure engagement frameworks can withstand shifting priorities and external pressures.

Embed engagement into governance structures

Push for engagement to be a standing function of governance.

Trust-building strategies

Establish and maintain ethical standards and community control over consultation narratives.

Caution against short-term approaches in political contexts.



Integrate engagement into strategic project planning

Advocate for engagement professionals to be involved from project inception, not just as a compliance step.

Push for engagement metrics in project evaluations, ensuring accountability at leadership levels.

Strengthen internal advocacy within organisations.

Equip internal advocates (e.g., Engagement Institute-trained staff) within organisations with tools and resources to influence internal decision-making, and best practice and minimum standards.

Utilise media

Shape the public narrative before misinformation spreads.

Position key engagement issues to gain traction with decision-makers.

Understand political incentives and shape sentiment to increase engagement impact.

Leverage professional bodies and networks

Work with peak bodies like Engagement Institute to develop industry guidelines for strategic engagement.

Advocate for regulatory or policy shifts that require early and meaningful engagement in major projects.

Authoritative advocacy

Use expertise to define effective engagement.

Educate on the risks of unregulated engagement.

Identify a political or bureaucratic champion.

Advocate for decentralised decision-making

Encourage empowering rural and regional leaders in shaping engagement strategies.

Assess transferability thoughtfully and evaluate social, economic and cultural alignment.



CONCLUSION

'Social capital is a really important principle that we should be adopting far more.'

Working within contested informational environments, strategic engagement faces significant challenges in distinguishing efforts from manipulative or partisan interventions. Raising awareness, understanding and the value of strategic engagement among decision-makers, therefore, must be understood in relation to how knowledge is produced, validated and disseminated within engagement processes. In this context, elevating the value of engagement is inextricably linked to the ability to reclaim and reinforce trust. For the erosion of trust due to disinformation creates an adversarial landscape where the legitimacy of engagement itself is questioned. This has profound implications for both the methodology and ethics of strategic engagement, as practitioners must not only counteract disinformation, but the practice must maintain credibility and legitimacy in public discourse.

Ultimately, the challenge of embedding strategic engagement underscores the broader struggle for democratic legitimacy and informed participation. Engagement practice must navigate a terrain where the very foundations of democracy are under threat. This necessitates not only solutions but a renewed commitment to engagement as a democratic imperative – one that

is vigilant against manipulation, adaptive to emerging threats, and resolute in its pursuit of meaningful participation. To be sure, positioning engagement as a strategic leadership capability requires decision-makers to develop a more sophisticated understanding of engagement to ensure it is integrated into institutional structures, governance frameworks and policy formation rather than remaining an isolated discipline. This, however, necessitates stronger safeguards around its definition as well as a commitment to transparency that can withstand scrutiny. For while governments increasingly recognise the importance of engagement, it is frequently treated as a function rather than a strategic capability embedded across leadership structures, resulting in poor engagement practices. In essence, the identification of poor engagement practices drives the fundamental shift required to raise awareness, understanding and value of strategic engagement: Without sustained and credible commitment, engagement remains reactive and compartmentalised, instead of strategically anchored within governance structures where long-term impact can build trust in democratic processes.



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