

What does learning by listening bring to citizen engagement? Lessons from a government program

María José Canel, Complutense University of Madrid, mjcanel@ucm.es (corresponding author).

Xabier Barandiarán, University of Deusto, xabier.barandiaran@deusto.es

Anne Murphy, Lancaster University, a.murphy2@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract

In public relations research, the concept of engagement is often theorized but seldom observed in practice. This research focuses on what public leaders learn when they undertake actions centered on learning by listening to society to implement governmental citizen engagement programs. Taking an inductive grounded approach to data analysis which draws on tools and methods of grounded theory as well as including a review of key concepts from public relations literature, a reflexive analysis of an action learning intervention involving the members of a provincial government was conducted. Results show that, when reflecting on interaction with stakeholders of the program, government members: increase their knowledge about both sides of the public organization-society relationship; become more sensitive to what listening is and implies, and, hence, more supportive of two-way communication; are challenged about the authenticity of the motivations behind their listening; become more aware of ways in which they work to build social capital; and, subsequently, increase their willingness to act together with society. This paper shows that reflection on the real implementation of engagement programs gives policy makers a better understanding of normative assumptions, and hence it instantiates public relations theories and concepts about engagement. By identifying acting-by-listening as integral to citizen engagement, it presents implications for the study and practice of public relations in public sector organizations.

Key words

Listening, Citizen Engagement, Community Engagement, Social Capital, Public Sector

1. Introduction: Looking at the practice of citizen engagement

This research examines the practical implementation of concepts that are mostly addressed on a theoretical level in public relations research. More specifically, it studies what public leaders learn when they attempt to listen to society in order to implement governmental citizen engagement programs. It is frequently claimed that “engaging” is

one of public relations practitioners' core duties. For example, the Melbourne Mandate contains a proposition on how PR professionals and professional bodies might better represent and promote their roles: "Public relations and communication professionals have a mandate to build a culture of listening and engagement" (Global Alliance, 2012; Gregory, 2015). But what does such a culture imply, and what does it mean for the practice of public relations?

This research was possible because a public authority within the provincial government of Gipuzkoa, Spain, decided to undertake a learning process focused on experiencing and practicing an openness to listen to society in order to improve the way in which it was implementing a government engagement program. The whole governmental body (twelve senior politicians) agreed to take part in an intervention with the explicit purpose of "learning by listening to society."¹ This provided a great opportunity to explore what really happens when policy makers put into practice normative assumptions and concepts such as listening that, together with others like interaction, involvement, relationships, dialogue, openness, and two-way communication, have been the subject of extensive theorization in the context of engagement (Dhanesh, 2017; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017).

The attempts by public sector organizations to engage citizens in public management has been regarded as a key area of theory and practice in public relations (Johnston, 2010; Johnston & Lane, 2018; Johnston & Lane, 2019; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). In fact, the literature stresses the role of relationships in community-engagement attempts (Yang & Callahan, 2005; Willis, 2012; Yang & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Johnston & Lane, 2018, 2019; Piqueiras, Canel, & Luoma-aho, 2020), on the basis that engaging requires continuous interactions (Bowden et al., 2016: 270). Relationship management, increasingly linked to public relations (Ihlen, 2005), can contribute to the creation of an environment of mutual trust, reciprocity, and engagement (Sommerfeldt, 2013: 285).

The engagement program that is the focus of this research was established after the public authority identified what the literature categorizes as a crisis of citizens' trust in public sector organizations, and it is part of a huge body of interventions that governments across the world are undertaking in an attempt to close breaches between them and society (Sanders & Canel, 2015; Gelders & Ihlen, 2010). There is even literature that already

¹ We are aware the term "society" has different meanings depending on the cultural context. "Society" was the term frequently used by the policy makers who participated in this research, and it refers to both societal organizations (including companies, research organizations, citizen associations, and NGOs) and end users of public services.

indicates that the pandemic has highlighted the need to “reconnect voices” to regain trust (Lovari et al., 2020), underlining the role of public relations in developing public engagement and participatory democracy (Chon et al, 2020; Bartoletti & Faccioli, 2020). Building citizen engagement is one course of action that might help to bridge these gaps by establishing common ground and fostering mutual understanding (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019 and 2020).

Whether public leaders learn about establishing common ground and fostering mutual understanding when implementing an engagement program is what is explored in this paper. The structure of this study is as follows. First, the context and methodology is presented. Second, the theoretical framework is introduced. Finally, the paper discusses the findings and present conclusions, additionally giving consideration to their implications for public relations research and practice.

2. The context: Etorkizuna Eraikiz, a governmental citizen engagement program

The provincial government of Gipuzkoa (the Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, sometimes referred to as DFG in this paper) in the Basque Country (northern Spain, capital San Sebastián, or Donostia in Basque) is trying to foster citizen engagement through a program called Etorkizuna Eraikiz (which means “building our future together” in English). The program comprises different projects in which public authorities and citizens (represented in entities such as businesses and societal, educational, and civic organizations) coparticipate to define and implement the province’s agenda.

At the time of data collection, the Etorkizuna Eraikiz program was in its second year, and provincial elections lay a year ahead on the horizon. An assessment of Etorkizuna Eraikiz against Johnston’s engagement typology (Johnston, 2010) reveals that its features include community consultation (societal organizations are called to discuss and set the agenda for the future) and participation (via the different projects, community members participate actively in developing solutions). More specifically, activities of engagement include: an initial phase of one year deliberation in which societal organizations (universities, companies, SMEs, NGOs, and citizen associations) together with public authorities defined priorities; co-experimentation by which the development of 27 projects is assessed by both the *diputación* and research entities to determine which ones should become a more stable part of public policies; societal organizations which belong to the executive body of eight “reference centers” were established to work in identified key areas of social innovation; the whole program carries out an ongoing deliberation in

an entity in which both public authorities and representatives of 80 societal organizations meet monthly to define public policies; together with an independent governance institute, a network of 12 municipalities has been established to expand the model in their towns; finally, a permanent polling entity collects public opinion feedback about public policies every three months. On the whole, and at the time of this study, the program included forty projects of different kinds, and more than 160 organizations were involved in both defining the provincial policy agenda, and in designing and implementing public policies in the areas of employment, elderly care, energy (climate change), mobility, artificial intelligence, immigration, education, social equity, and culture.

The collaborative governance model that this program is attempting to build implies important changes to the structures and procedures of governance (Canel, Luoma-aho, & Barandiarán, 2020). For instance, a new way of budgeting was adopted, through which costs were assigned by project and not by department. And a new cross-departmental unit was established—the Strategic Management Unit (*Dirección General de Gestión Estratégica*)—on the assumption that an engagement program entails a more cross-cutting form of management. Changes of this kind had repercussions on the way in which different actors involved in the projects interact, and this is the focus of this paper.

3. Methodology

The decisions taken concerning the methodological design of this study were guided by the fact that this research aims to look at the actual practice of public leaders as they attempt to “do” engagement in the context of a government engagement program. In particular, three aspects of the study stem from this fact.

First, a case study method was deployed on the assumption that doing so is helpful for understanding the application of theory to specific situations (Stacks, 2016: 180). Following Cutler’s suggestion (Cutler, 2004), this method was used in order to study a research problem. The object of this research is what policy makers learn when they explicitly reflect on their experiences of trying to listen to society within the context of an actual ongoing process, namely the implementation of an engagement program, that is embedded in social or organizational contexts. In this case, the contexts are Gipuzkoan society and the province of Gipuzkoa’s political institution, the *diputación*.

Second, this study is a reflective analysis of a learning-by-listening process which takes an action-learning approach (Revans, 2011). This learning methodology is based on

learning from actions taken in the face of “wicked problems”—that is, problems that are intractable and not amenable to traditional and linear approaches. The problem faced by the study’s participants is one such problem. Willis (2016) argues that wicked problems need public relations since they can only be confronted if the organization engages with and involves stakeholders, and the learning process that was observed reflects the characteristics that this author describes.

Finally, since the purpose was to understand how the research subjects reflected on and learned from their interactions in actual engagement practice, it was decided in the initial analysis to foreground an emic perspective by making use of grounded theory. As Stacks points out, rather than facilitating an examination of abstract relationships between concepts and constructs, the aims behind grounded theory are to understand common categories found in daily interaction and to explain everyday activity, with practice-based theory potentially emerging in doing so (Stacks, 2016: 180). Therefore, a grounded theory approach to conduct qualitative data analysis was followed.

The following subsections describe in greater detail how these methodological aspects were understood and operationalized for the case study of an explicit action learning process conducted in the context of an ongoing government engagement program.

3.1. A reflective analysis of an action-learning process

A reflective analysis of the implementation of the methodology of action learning was carried out. This methodology understands learning as a cyclical process of problem-action-reflection-action: participants bring their issues to a group, where they are critically analyzed by others. Each participant formulates actions to tackle the issue and commits to implementing them (Pedler, 2011; Revans, 2011). Learning occurs as participants periodically report to the group on the implemented actions and undertake insightful examination with the help of the group. This focus on actions is what is relevant for the methodological design of the present study: participants were not only exposed to “talk” about listening (its benefits or whatever normative assumptions), but also were encouraged to take actions that involved interacting with the stakeholders involved in the engagement program.

Data were produced by participants within a learning process that corresponded to the characteristics described above. Participants were the twelve senior policy makers that

the government of the province of Gipuzkoa comprises.² The group faced, in action-learning terminology (Revans, 2011), the “wicked problem” of learning by listening to society in order to implement projects that are part of the Etorkezuna Eraikiz governmental citizen engagement program. This meant that as part of the action-learning intervention, participants would share with one another personal experiences, examples, and data collected during their interactions with Etorkezuna Eraikiz project stakeholders (such as societal organizations and public services’ end users) as well as with other politicians and civil servants within the organization. What they reported to the group, then, was their interaction with other actors involved in the engagement program.

The interaction that took place among participants in the action-learning meetings focused on the process of listening to various stakeholders and on analyzing, as a group, what had actually been heard so that new actions to address emerging problems and challenges could be identified and undertaken. The actions that participants implemented throughout the process included the development of new ways to reach out to citizens, the collection of stakeholders’ feedback, and interaction with their teams that aimed to make sense of what the participants called “signals from society.” These actions really meant interacting more and better with other departments, with societal organizations, and with citizens. However, it is important to note that it is the participants’ reflections on these interactions rather than the interactions themselves that are captured by the data.

Data were produced by participants after each meeting: time was set aside for them to reflect in writing on a series of questions included in an administered questionnaire. After they had provided written answers, they were also asked to discuss their thoughts in pairs and threes, before sharing insights among the group as a whole. In other words, action learning is not the research methodology but a means by which data were collected to answer the research question.

The questions posed in the questionnaire were framed in terms of reviewing and recording different aspects of learning (Pedler & Abbott, 2013: 79-80). Participants were asked about their process of learning and, more specifically, about what they had learned about the two sides involved in an interaction process: themselves (their projects, the governmental body, and the institution) and “the others”—in this case, civil servants and

² One of these participants is one of the authors. The other two authors were set advisors, meaning that they facilitated the implementation of the learning methodology. The role as advisors made it possible to design and collect field data and look at the process first hand.

society (citizens and the organizations that they interact with as part of the Etorikizuna Eraikiz projects). They were also asked about what they had learned regarding the process of listening and of learning.

Since this is a case study that looks at a learning-by-listening process undertaken by the whole government of the *diputación* (the executive body), the sample is composed by all members of the government. The twelve members attended all the meetings (except from two people who missed one). There were five meetings (each of which went on for five hours); they took place at approximately one-and-a-half-month intervals, meaning that the process lasted for six months in total.

3.2. Grounded theory for the analysis of data

To undertake qualitative analysis of data, grounded theory was used for the following reasons.

The starting point for extracting meaning from the learning outcomes as these were reported by participants of the process was to acknowledge that research methods develop within specific contexts rather than being context free (Charmaz, 2014). The grounded theory approach gives room for the interpretation of “real” experiences in their local contexts (Lansisalmi, Peiró, & Kivimaki, 2004: 253), facilitates understanding of issues that require the researcher to go beyond theory and look for a fresh view based on ideas and concepts that emerge from the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Second, researchers were looking to understand the meanings that were socially shared in the group, and grounded theory adopts the epistemological assumption that meanings are constructed and modified by actors through social interpretations and experiences (Bryant, 2002). The knowledge goal was not to improve understanding of an objective reality—that is, whether there is actual listening or not—but rather how members of the provincial government interact with each other and with relevant stakeholders when these leaders make an explicit attempt to learn by listening to society, as they define it.

Drawing on inductive methods and analytical coding tools of grounded theory, such as line-by-line coding, analytical memo writing and constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin 1998), it was sought to move from the specific to the general ‘in a series of steps of increasing abstraction’ (Fairhurst & Putnam 2019:921). Following Strauss & Corbin the process began with data collection and literature was used post data collection as a source for concepts with which to make sense of and theorise from the data (2002: 126). In the

same vein, Lansisalmi et al. were followed within an approach that is based on context and also applies a priori concepts (Lansisalmi, Peiró, & Kivimaki, 2004: 253). We agree with these authors' view that "grounded theory gives room for the interpretation of 'real' experiences of the participants and also provides a systematic means to efficiently analyze large quantities of unstructured qualitative data" (Lansisalmi, Peiró, & Kivimaki, 2004: 253). Therefore an abductive procedure of analysis was undertaken that aimed to make explicit the intersubjective interpretation of texts in dialogue with theoretical concepts.

In practice, this meant going back and forth between the data, the literature, and the researchers' interpretations. Therefore, data analysis generated (in vivo) codes and categories via the application of grounded theory as a means of describing characteristics and properties; categories, themes, and subthemes were defined following a literature review centered on the concepts explored below.

Following Braun and Clarke's criteria for good thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and informed by concrete examples of the application of grounded theory (such as that of Fay, 2011), the following steps were taken. First, the data were read and reread several times in order to conduct open coding for the responses given by participants. A total of 643 units were open coded, from which 741 annotations were made. Recurrence and repetition were used to help identify themes. Axial coding was then used to make connections between categories and collapse categories with overlapping conceptual domains.

Additionally, both governmental documents and interview-based reports were used to understand the context of this case, but the data upon which this research is based were generated through the learning process above described. Therefore, and to be more precise, this is not a documented case study of a full engagement program, but a documented case study of the reflection generated on the learning process developed with a government body that wanted to listen to society in order to implement an engagement program, and it uses qualitative data that were generated through questionnaires and were thematically analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

4. Theory review

The first step in the formulation of methodology was to conduct a review of the public relations literature's treatment of key concepts. The case study's observation object was a learning-by-listening process to implement an engagement program, and so

engagement, learning, and listening were the selected concepts. The conducted literature review indicated that social capital might be a relational resource that derives from an engaging action, and hence this term was included in the review.

4.1. The challenge of engaging citizens in policy making

Review of the huge volume of literature on engagement was guided by the fact that this research looks at an engagement program undertaken by a government, and therefore the focus is engagement from an organizational perspective in the area of the public sector. Attempts by public sector organizations to engage citizens have emerged under different names—for example, “citizen engagement,” “civic engagement,” “community engagement,” “collaborative citizenship,” and “citizen involvement efforts” (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). This research looks at the actions a government undertakes to foster citizens involvement in the deliberation, design, and implementation of public policies. In the area of public relations research, a term used for such initiatives is “community engagement” (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006; Head, 2008; Johnston, 2010; Dare, Schirmer, & Vanclay, 2014; Johnston & Lane, 2018), but in this article the term used is “citizen engagement” because “community” tended not to feature in the discourse of the members of the *diputación*’s executive when they referred to what they were attempting to do (the phrases they used were “engaging citizens” and “engaging society.”)

As already mentioned, the literature puts relationships at the core of engagement attempts. Through literature review two discussions were found, both of which concern the characteristics of the established relationships in engagement programs, that proved enlightening for the interpretation of the data. The first is the direction of the relationship with which an organization tries to foster engagement. Several studies (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Johnston & Lane, 2019, to quote just some) refer to a contradiction between the theory/rhetoric of citizen participation and what, for instance, Bowden et al. (2016) call “a practice of one-way consultation” (p. 259). In opposition to a traditional one-way communication culture, scholars argue that new forms of engagement, developed along with technologically advanced and empowered citizens, require a bottom-up perspective with a two-way flow of dialogue (Canel & Luoma-aho 2019; Bowden, Luoma-aho, & Naumann 2016).

In a recent study on the practice of community engagement, Johnston and Lane (2018) state that community engagement “is a relational process embedded with concepts of

value and exchange that draws on the characteristics of the communication process (time, scope, intensity, and character) to achieve social level outcomes” (p. 635). The two types of practiced engagement that they highlight, which they call “episodic” and “relational” engagement, entail different conceptualizations of relationship building, relationship maintaining, and, ultimately, the capacity of engagement programs for real cocreation with stakeholders.

The second discussion relates to the purpose of an engaging action, and the issue is whether goals and outcomes are just organizational or whether they reach a social broader level. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover the large volume of literature that addresses this issue, and so just some of the studies here will be discussed. There are certainly studies that argue that engagement helps organizations to fulfil their goals to the extent that it offers a means to deal with community expectations and to build community support (Luoma-aho et al., 2020; Johnston & Lane, 2018), as well as providing a social license to operate (Dare, Schirmer, & Vanclay, 2014) and ways to enhance citizens’ participation in the assessment of needs and of practical solutions (Adams & Hess 2001; Head, 2008). And there are studies that argue from a social point of view that citizen engagement benefits citizens and communities (Coursey, Yang, & Pandey, 2012; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015), helps to solve community problems and enable a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006), fosters citizenship values (Coursey et al., 2012), and helps citizens access information and interact with each other and with organizations (Johnston & Lane, 2018).

Whether the type of established relationship in an engagement program is one way or two way, whether it attempts to develop deliberation only or it includes involving stakeholders in actions, and whether it pursues merely organizational goals or also social ones are issues that facilitate exploration of what a government learns when trying to listen society in order to engage it. Since the learning intervention that this research looks at entails action, meaning real interactions with stakeholders, first research question explores the relationship by asking the following:

RQ1 What do public leaders learn about themselves and others as they reflect on their interactions with stakeholders within an engagement program?

4.2. Learn about listening to citizens if you want to engage them

This research is based on a reflection about a real process of learning. The government of the province met to listen to each other in order to face a wicked problem, that of listening to society to better engage it in public management. The administered questionnaire included questions about what they had learned about learning as well as about listening after each meeting.

The public relations literature discusses the role that public relations management plays in learning and listening, and several contributions within it proved helpful when it came to analyzing the data on self-reported learning outcomes about the process of listening. Willis (2016) finds a close connection between public relations and learning about wicked problems. Wicked problems, he argues, require building relations and community problem solving, since dialogue (with the appropriate time and rules for interaction) is the only viable option for their resolution. It is through this dialogue that it is possible to understand one another's interpretations of a problem and to work together to tackle it. When those learning conditions occur, new knowledge emerges, since tacit individual knowledge is turned into collective shared knowledge. Organizational learning thus requires viable and sustainable spaces to be created so people can come together to establish common ground and mutual understanding. The space that the government wanted to create with the methodology of action learning and that this research analyses corresponds to this description.

To interpret the data pertaining to what the participants had learned about listening, this research drew on Macnamara's contribution on what organizational listening is and what it implies (Macnamara, 2015; Jim Macnamara, 2016; Macnamara, 2018). Based on the assumption that organizational listening has dimensions that encompass culture, procedures, policies, structures, resources, skills, and technologies, Macnamara posits an "architecture of listening" that comprises the following elements: 1) an *organizational culture* that is open to listening (and that includes the following key elements: *recognizing* others' right to speak, *acknowledging* what is said, *paying attention* to others, *interpreting*, *understanding* others' perspectives, *considering* what others say, and *responding*); 2) *policies* that specify who is to be listened to and how listening is to be conducted; 3) *structures and processes for listening*, including job descriptions, roles, functions, and tasks; 4) *technologies* to aid listening; 5) *resources*; 6) listening *skills*; and 7) *articulation* of the voices of stakeholders and publics in the context of policy making and decision making.

These conditions of learning and listening frame the second research question, which is as follows:

RQ2 What do public leaders learn about their own attitudes towards listening as they reflect on their interaction with stakeholders of an engagement program?

4.3. Engaging for what: Social outcomes of government engagement programs

There is a relevant group of studies that argue that engagement might have not only organizational outcomes but also social ones, in the form of a relational resource: the social capital that derives from engagement programs, which helps those programs to shift from serving organizational purposes to solving community problems (see for instance Heath, 2006; Taylor, 2011; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Johnston & Lane, 2018).

Social capital is a complex, multidimensional concept, and it is an umbrella term that has been analyzed from different perspectives and angles. In this study, it is treated as a relational resource from which intangible capital for the community and society might be associated with citizen engagement programs. The concept refers to features that enable people to act collectively. Social capital “consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible” (Cohen & Prusak, 2001: 4).

Social capital is a “relational capital”, because it resides in the relations among individuals and organizations (Johnston & Lane, 2018; Maak, 2007; Yang & Taylor, 2013). The relationships an organization possesses can facilitate outcomes such as collaboration and growth, and thus social capital consists of intangible assets than can be accrued for the benefit of the individual actor and an entire network (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011: 199).

The conceptualization of social capital broadens the consideration of the outcomes of a citizen engagement program. Rather than being confined to a specific entity, “social capital is what can emerge from communicators’ efforts to negotiate meaning and build relationships in a network and help achieve shared goals” (Saffer, 2019: 283).

Based on the literature review, it can be stated that social capital can be evidenced in the existence of: shared definitions of problems and of ways of tackling them; shared views of the challenges for the future; mutual understanding, acquaintance, and recognition;

facilitation of cooperative action; and mutual trust. This characterization helps to framing the third research question, which is as follows:

RQ3- What, if anything, do public leaders make explicit about social capital when they reflect on their interaction with stakeholders of an engagement program?

5. Results and discussion

Key ideas from the public relations literature were used as an analytic lens through which data on self-reported learning outcomes were interpreted. As explained earlier, the approach to grounded theory used meant giving room for the interpretation of real experiences by looking for ideas and concepts that emerged from data collected, the systematic analysis of which was provided by the literature review. It is worth restating at this point that data were drawn from the reflective accounts provided by the members of a government body who were participating in a learning process that entailed implementing actions and discussing that implementation with the group. Therefore, public leaders learned by interacting with citizens in actions such as trying new ways of arranging public encounters, reaching out to novel sectors of society, and collecting and reflecting on public service end users' feedback. Next, the results and discussion are presented.

5.1. Acknowledging gaps in relationships

What do public leaders learn about themselves and the others as they reflect on their interaction with stakeholders of an engagement program? As mentioned, participants were asked at each meeting what they had learned about the two sides included in the relationship—that is, themselves and the citizens whom they are trying to engage.

A vision of an “unable us” versus an “unwilling them” emerged from the thematic analysis of the responses provided by the participants after each of the first two meetings. Negative perceptions predominated. Participants felt unable to go through the transformation that the engagement program entailed (the following are some examples: “This is tough”,³ P8; “We fear big changes”, P7; “We are trapped by inertia”, P3). They took the view that the organization was attached to old ways of doing things and old structures, and that it was unable to reach out to citizens or become attuned to their needs and expectations.

³ Participants are identified numerically to protect anonymity.

Negative assessments also predominated their judgements about the civil servants they work with and the society they attempt to engage. They saw citizens as very remote from government, and they categorized society as complex, unpredictable, heterogeneous, demanding, politically disaffected, unfamiliar with engagement processes, and unwilling to participate.

At an early stage of the learning process, participants became aware that there was a large gap between the two sides of the relationship that they were trying to establish via the engagement program. The picture that emerged in the data from the two first meetings about the relationships between “us” and “them” was one of a breach, which is well represented in the following statements: “We don’t manage to reach out to society, we aren’t able to connect and to be by its side in the evolution it is going through” (P5); “We don’t know where society is going to and where to meet it.” (P11). In short: the politicians felt removed from society and, as they explicitly stated, they felt no trust. Over the learning process, they acknowledged positive features about the two sides of the relationship, but before that aspect is considered it will be examined what they learned about listening.

5.2. Learning about listening

At the beginning, the participants even had a negative view of the listening process that they were trying to undertake. “We say we want to listen,” one participant remarked after the second meeting, “but what we are doing is merely looking for support for our projects.” (P3)

What did they learn about their attitudes towards listening when interacting with stakeholders of the engagement process? As the learning process advanced and participants met to listen to each other and to report to the group on what they had learned from their interactions with different societal organizations, they debated and learned from their attempt to listen to society. They became aware of the need to establish policies and structures for listening. Their awareness encompassed: a) the concept of listening itself; b) the purpose of listening (“We need to define what we understand by ‘listening’ and what it is for”, P2); c) the required attention (they frequently lamented how little time they allocated to listening in their day-to-day routines); d) who should be listened to (there were frequent debates about whether the societal organizations they were meeting really represented citizens at large); e) listening mechanisms (“We need to undertake a listening plan, to devote time to listening, and to be trained in listening skills.”, P8); and f) the way

to provide an appropriate response (“We should systematize the process of listening to guarantee we give a response”, P11).

Debates developed about what listening is and what it implies, as well as about the need for coherence between what they called “a theory and a practice of listening.” Participants exhibited a fear of the harm that could be caused if citizens saw the projects as cosmetic listening. They appeared to see the risk of lacking honesty and authenticity, and they voiced normative judgments about the process of listening: it has to be “sincere,” “effective,” “honest,” “real,” “active,” “receptive,” “with a clear vocation to learn.”

It has been already mentioned that this research did not aim to measure what the participants actually heard during the listening process; the aim was instead to understand what public leaders learn when they attempt to listening. Analysis of data allow to state that the group increased its sensitivity to Macnamara’s “architecture of listening” and to the need to change from a “listen to us” mode to a “let’s listen to them” one. A strong shared desire to create and maintain an environment in which listening could occur emerged in the group. In the same way, while this analysis does not allow to measure their authenticity (by looking, for instance, at the three dimensions of authenticity suggested by Johnston and Lane, 2019: message, person, process), we feel able to state that the learning process exposed them to challenging reflections about their authenticity in being willing to engage citizens in policy making. As one participant remarked at the final meeting, “I have become aware that at first we were more concerned about our communication performance than about what society has to tell us.” (P2)

5.3. Becoming aware of social relational resources

What, if anything, do public leaders make explicit about social capital when they reflect on their interaction with stakeholders of an engagement program? Analysis of data allows to state that participants became aware of the existence of certain elements that the literature attributes to social capital.

First, shared meanings, mutual understanding, and common ground seemed to emerge in the group. More specifically, the learning process brought about shared understandings of problems (“I became aware the others share my problem more than I expected”, P4), challenges (“I became aware how much I share with the group the challenges for the future”, P11), ways of tackling them (“We all share the same calling and ways of doing things”, P10), and normative assumptions about engagement and democracy (there are

many statements of the following kind: “We should involve society. This would enhance democracy and allow us to make more efficient public policies.”, P5)

There is ample evidence that participants experienced an increasing cohesion within the group (many statements include the notion of being more cohesive), and several of them reflect on how cohesiveness includes an awareness of diversity (for example: “This is a diverse group, with different views, very plural but with a high level of self-recognition as a group”, P2).

The reflective accounts also show that participants felt that trust derives from the learning process. As trust in the potential and progress of the group grew, participants became more willing to express their opinions (“There is trust. I can tell everyone is speaking freely”, P6) and to work together (“We have the capacity to work in a team, and we are willing to do so”, P10).

Analysis of data allows to state that the learning process led participants to explicitly state that these outcomes were not confined to the group and the organization but also extended to the broader social level. The group’s cohesiveness helped participants to jointly acknowledge the engagement program’s potential as a driving force for transforming not only the organization but also Gipuzkoa and its society more generally. That acknowledgement also helped the participants to become more aligned with the program.

Shared meanings, increased cohesion, and higher trust in the group seem to have affected the way in which the participants saw society. They realized that they shared views not only with the rest of the group, but also with the societal organizations that they had been meeting as part of the different projects (“The challenge we are facing is shared by many societal organizations and companies, and it is good that we are looking for solutions with them”, P10), as well as with society at large (“Today I realize that we share with citizens more than what we expected”, P4). Data also allow to argue that the heightened trust that the group members felt toward one another helped them to acknowledge an increased trust in society. As one participant commented at the final meeting, “This society deserves our trust in it.” (P7)

It seems that participants’ reflection on their interaction with the stakeholders of the engagement program helped them to become aware of the existence of certain elements (such as shared meanings, increased cohesion, and mutual trust) and hence to articulate the notion of social capital more explicitly. In other words, the process revealed in more

detail the ways in which they worked to contribute social capital, even though they used this term just twice.

5.4. From “us versus them” to “us acting together”: Becoming open to cocreation

Analysis of the data derived from participants’ responses and the research notes taken during the discussions paints an overall picture in which participants seem to have undertaken a journey that entailed a transformative change in the way in which they saw both sides of the relationship and, consequently, in how they approached the governmental citizen engagement program.

The learning process brought about, first of all, an increased awareness of an evolving society: “Society is changing much more than what we are aware of” (P8); “Society might be on a journey which is more relevant than what we are aware of.” (P10). Second, it entailed a negative-to-positive evolution in the participants’ assessments of those whom they want to engage: “It seems society is open to collaboration” (P1); “The citizens I am meeting are willing to be active actors” (P4); “This society is more open and tolerant and less prejudiced than what I expected.” (P5). Third, their judgements about themselves became more positive. In particular, they felt better able to undertake the engagement program: “We feel enabled to pursue our projects” (P7); “There is a stronger belief in what we are doing.” (P5).

Since participants’ learning came about not only by talking about listening (reflective accounts are not only normative) but by actually meeting societal organizations and citizens to listen to them, what they found led them to reflect on the authenticity of their program and to act based on those reflections, as the following excerpts show: “I have learned you have to trust citizens. If the attempt is sincere, citizens pick up on it and get involved” (P6); “It seems that when we approach society with the right key (really listening, co-creating, etc.) it responds satisfactorily” (P1); “If we offer credibility, society is willing to participate and get involved.” (P4).

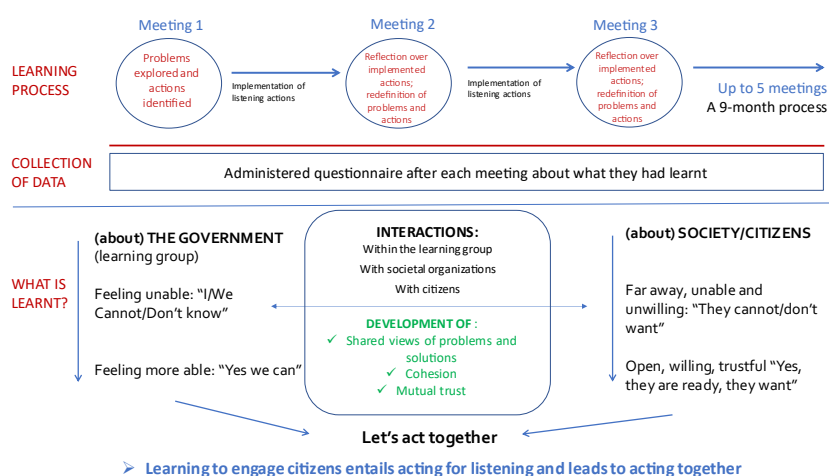
It could be argued that the learning process that this government decided to take part in alongside the engagement program enabled the participants to learn more about other group members, the civil servants with whom they work, and the organization, as well as to discover a society that is genuinely willing to participate. It generated the pre-conditions for taking steps to really listen to what citizens are telling them, and, as a

consequence, they felt better able and more motivated to embrace change and to reinforce a shared willingness to become open to sharing power with society.

The overall journey undertaken by participants can be categorized as going from “I/we cannot” to “I/we can” and from “we can” to “we want”—in other words, from acknowledging gaps to an increased determination for self-transformation by bringing listening to policy making. This is well reflected in the following two statements taken from the final meeting: “Today I am more aware that I am more capable of acting with the group and with society” (P9); “Now we really want listening to be reflected in policy making.” (P6).

Figure 1 summarizes and presents the results and discussion.

Figure 1. Learning by listening about citizen engagement



CONCLUSIONS

This research has looked at the actual practice of public leaders as they attempt to “do” engagement in the context of an ongoing government engagement program. It has explored what the members of a government learn when they explicitly reflect on their experiences of trying to listen to society.

It has shown that, over the process, participants became aware of the gap that exists between them and the society they want to engage. They became more sensitive to what real listening is and what it implies, and by reflecting on their interactions with stakeholders, they scrutinized the authenticity of their motivations for listening. They developed shared meanings for problems, solutions, and normative frameworks, and they became more cohesive as a group and more aligned with organizational goals. Since this learning occurred through repeated real interactions not only between participants but between participants and societal organizations, they acknowledged that the increase in shared meanings, cohesion, and trust that they experienced could ultimately be extended to society, and thus became aware of the relational social outcomes that could derive from engagement programs.

What learning by listening contributed was a new way of looking at the engagement program in which acting by listening became an integral aspect of engagement. Rather than a causal relationship (“let’s first learn to listen and then act to engage”), they found an entwined and mutual causality. It is revealing that several participants’ statements categorized the Etorkizuna project as a “learning space” as well as a “listening space.” Based on this research, we would argue that what these public leaders learned is that a governmental engagement program is also an “acting-together space.” Engagement is listening, and if listening is real—this is what these public leaders seem to have learned—openness for organizational self-transformation happens. They learned that acting together with citizens enables them to be more determined to undertake self-transformations and, ultimately, to be more open to sharing power with those whom they want to engage.

This research has provided evidence from a real case of learning about citizen engagement which has proven that governmental attempts to engage society might have outcomes that go beyond the organization and reach a broader social level. Because the study focused on actual practice, it offers insights into how these programs might “make a difference” for society. Participants put into practice concepts and normative ideas about how relationships are to be established and maintained for engagement, and in this respect, this research instantiates public relations principles.

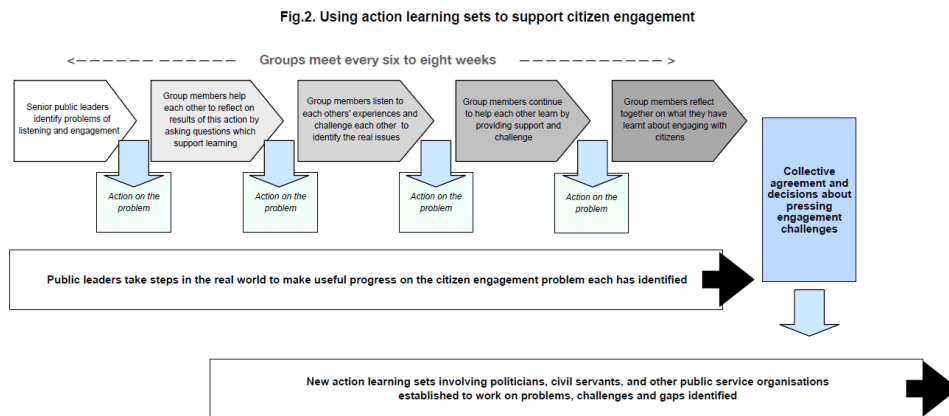
In authors’ view, this case study raises two implications for the practice and the study of public relations in governmental citizen engagement programs. First, the case is encouraging in terms of the development of action learning processes to accompany

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governmental citizen engagement programs. With this in mind, we produced Figure 2, which presents a process model for other public sector organizations to use if they wish to undertake action learning processes to support citizen engagement. Second, the learning by listening that was undertaken in the case study lends support to the idea that the concept of engagement should be reviewed so as to bring to its core a two-way involvement: the participants reported that they learned that citizens will not engage if policy makers do not do so as well. This reinforces claims made in the public relations literature (see, for instance, Taylor & Kent, 2014; Jelen-Sánchez, 2017; Dhanesh, 2017; Johnston & Lane, 2018) that research should develop methodologies and approaches to focus more on society and to understand engagement in terms of interactions with publics.

This research responds to this claim: the action learning approach has shown to help in conceptualizing the links between listening, learning and action. Learning and listening both start from the awareness of not knowing the answers to the questions or challenges being addressed. This study highlights that both rely on taking action in the face of these challenges, and it is in taking purposeful action in order to listen and learn that engagement actually takes place. Further research exploring this acting-by-listening aspect that this research has shown to be integral to citizen engagement would help to conceptualize the bridging role public relations have in building democratic societies; and hence, it would also help in understanding better how this research field can contribute in the challenge that post-pandemic contexts bring of “reconnecting voices” (Lovari et al., 2020).

Whether organizational listening is fostered out of this process is something that cannot be argued based on this research, and nor was this question among its research goals. What we feel can be concluded from the analysis is that participants from this group (a front-line governmental body) became more supportive of two-way communication that entails acting together with those whom the government body wants to engage. The party in government won the elections in May 2019, and in order to continue implementing the Etorikizuna Eraikiz program, it undertook two learning processes similar to the one analyzed here, this time bringing together in the group politicians, civil servants, and societal organizations. Moreover, it has systematized feedback-collection tools, and it has organized meetings to discuss feedback on a more regular basis. The outcomes of such listening actions could be explored in further research.



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