

U.S ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VIDEO  
TRAINING PROGRAM**

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

MODULE 8.  
**INTEGRATING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION  
INTO YOUR ORGANIZATION**



**PUBLIC  
PARTICIPATION**  

---

**GUIDE**

*Engage the public. Preserve the planet.*

## Introduction

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap,  
but by the seeds that you plant.

— Robert Louis Stevenson

**The approach to public participation presented in the EPA Guide is challenging.**

To do this well involves a lot of hard work. Sometimes, the challenges are less about knowing what to do, as it is getting all parts of the system to believe that they should do it at all. This is because *public participation is as much a cultural challenge as it is one of designing and implementing an effective process*. In countries with little experience in participation, it can be difficult to know where and how to get started.

In places where governments and their agencies have a lot of power to make decisions, they have less incentive to seek input from the public. The public, for their part, have little experience or knowledge of how to participate effectively. Sometimes, the public is afraid to participate, worried about what will happen if they speak out. Often, they simply lack the time, or worry that they do not know enough to offer good input. Thus, both sides can be stuck in a culture that creates barriers to participation.

USEPA's Public Participation Guide provides a framework for understanding public participation, a process for approaching effective participation, and a wide range of tools and approaches for implementing successful projects. However, *we recognize that it is not always possible or practical to do everything* you would like to do in working with your communities.

In many circumstances, we need to proceed more slowly and deliberately and look for opportunities to share information and opportunities to incorporating principles of participation and the value it provides to the agency for our leaders, staff, and communities.

## **Integration Strategies in Module 8:**

1. Be Fundamental in Your Approach to Public Participation
2. Build Internal Capacity
3. Think Small
4. Seek Out Local Champions and Resources
5. Teach Stakeholders How to Participate



## Integration Strategy 1. Be Fundamental in Your Approach to Public Participation

*If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.*

-African Proverb

You cannot do everything, so you need to focus your time and resources on the things that are most important.

**Focus on What Matters.** Look for the areas where public input will most help you and that are most important to your communities. Make the focus of public participation the areas where public input can matter most. Never ask for input on issues where public opinion will not be used.

**Clarify your boundaries.** There are always restrictions on what you can do and where the public can be involved—legal, regulatory, financial, logistical, etc. Spend some time clearly articulating these and communicating them widely.

**Be realistic about your resources.** Before you make any promises to the community, make sure the resources exist to follow through. Focus your time and money on those things that you identify as most important.

**Practice transparency.** Even though the public cannot affect every aspect of the decision, ensure that the public has the full context and information they need to understand the entire project and provide input where asked.



## Integration Strategy 2. Build Internal Capacity

Building participatory capacity begins with understanding the value of participation, then expanded awareness of how it works, and finally detailed skills training. Some ideas to consider include:

**Identify and address resistance.** Take the time to clarify why the organization or staff does not embrace public participation. Have detailed discussions about the fears and assumptions about public participation. What we find is that often the results we most fear, are the results we have gotten when we are NOT doing the kind of meaningful participation we have talked about in this program.

**Get management on board.** Once we begin to understand the potential value of meaningfully engaging the public, it is essential to have management understand the benefits of public participation, and communicate this need and the value to all staff in a consistent and fundamental way.

**Establish internal dialogues.** Don't just do public participation out of habit. Sit down with the full team and talk about what we hope to achieve from our participation programs. Evaluate results together and talk about the factors that led to different outcomes.

**Train your staff.** Everyone needs to feel comfortable in their role with the public, and have the skills and knowledge to plan and implement successful projects. Integrate training into project planning in small doses. Steady, consistent information and guidance is usually more effective than a one-time program.

**Train management, too.** Conducting public participation events and managing programs that incorporate public participation are two different things. Management needs to understand how to inspire and guide staff to do good participation work. They need to set the example for why and how we can be participatory in our work.



## Try This: Some Quick Ideas to Build Internal Capacity

Look for ways to become a more participatory organization. It is difficult to practice public participation without first being more participatory in how we do our work internally. Start thinking about your internal decision-making, how much do we engage all of our staff in making key decisions? Apply some of the principles from the guide to your internal meetings and processes and then debrief as a team to understand the impacts and values of working together.

**Get managers to model the behaviors you are seeking.** When leaders and influential workers act differently, people notice and will often follow suit.

**Incorporate public participation messages into a variety of meetings and communication.** Think about the shift toward a more participatory culture. Identify the key messages and learnings that you want people to adopt. Don't rely on single, longer events or trainings, rather set some time aside in all meetings to provide a steady stream of information and reminders.

**Create a participation strike force.** Think about identifying a few folks from across your organization who are skilled in participation to work with projects as they are in the planning stages to incorporate good participation. Then have the team check in regularly to assess progress and offer advice and assistance. A few hours here and there on a regular basis by passionate and qualified people can make a real difference.

**Reward innovation.** Create recognition for good participation. Call out individuals who are doing good work and explain how their work is improving your use of participation.



## GROUP DISCUSSION

### Building Capacity for Public Participation

Read through the quick ideas to build internal capacity on page 4. How might these ideas work in your organization?

What are some other approaches that might help?



### Integration Strategy 3. **Think Small**

You don't have to change everything all at once. A shift toward a more participatory culture can happen slowly over time through consistent small activities.

**Look for small wins.** Expanding the use of participation requires the building of trust. Explore smaller activities to demonstrate that people are capable of working together cooperatively. Also try exploring common ground on less controversial issues.

**Create spaces for dialogue.** Look for informal opportunities for dialogue between government and citizens-get used to listening to each other. Reach out to community leaders and groups of people who are already working at the local level.

**Learn how to apologize.** We all make mistakes. Sometimes things just don't go well, people become upset, and processes get stuck. The only way to truly move forward is to take responsibility. Recognize those things you may have done to cause the upset, and apologize. Ignoring even small insults between people can often prevent any hope of progress.





## Try This: Some Quick Ideas on Thinking Smaller

**Hold informal sessions.** Don't wait for something big to talk about, reach out to individuals and groups in the community to talk about your work and how the community could get involved. Talk about issues and concerns in the communities and get to know stakeholders.

**Join local activities.** In anticipation of planning your own work, look at how some local groups are talking to the community. See what is working and what is not, ask people about their experience and what they would need to engage in other projects.

**Get simple input.** Look for opportunities to get input to your work without a large event. Reach out in simple ways to talk about something discreet. Use the input as much as possible and communicate back to people how their input was useful.



## Integration Strategy 4. Seek Out Local Champions and Resources

Resource constraints are always a challenge. Look for ways to build on the resources that both you and your community already have in place. Sharing resources builds relationships and helps create a foundation for finding common ground.

**Engage community leadership.** Community leaders can be found in many places, some obvious and some not. Make sure that the people who claim to be leaders truly do have the respect of their constituents. Once identified, reach out to community leaders and explain what you hope to achieve and how it can help their communities, and explore ways that they can help.

**Engage local organizations.** NGOs and other civic groups have many resources, including good understanding of community members and culture, capacity to communicate and engage people, and a desire to build the capacity for participation at the grassroots level.

**Build local capacity.** Local organizations and individuals are often willing to volunteer or barter their time in exchange for the community benefits that may come with the project you are seeking to implement. Meeting locations, equipment, communication vehicles, and community networks are present in many locations.

**Leverage existing communication.** Part of getting to know your community is learning about how they already communicate around issues that are important. Look for opportunities to provide information about your projects through those same channels.



## Integration Strategy 5. Teach Stakeholders How to Participate

Don't assume that people understand either the value or process of participation. Most people have little experience in meaningful participation and don't understand how their behavior can contribute either positively or negatively. In many cases, people simply don't believe that it can work, so are reluctant to engage at all.

**Communicate continuously.** Help people understand both what you are doing and why. Explain what they can expect from you, as well as what you expect from them. Most important, help people to see the possibilities and their own self-interest in working together.

**Engage stakeholders in the planning process.** Ask stakeholders to identify what works and what they need in order to participate. When people are involved in the planning process, they understand what you are trying to achieve and the importance of their own participation, and are more committed to working on the project.

**Look for teachable moments.** Look for those moments when things happen, both good and bad, and help stakeholders to understand why. Always explain what you are doing and why it's important.

**Get young people engaged.** Often our best hope is to teach the next generations the attitudes and skills of participation so that they become habits.

**Celebrate and communicate progress.** Don't let good things pass by unnoticed. Communicate and celebrate the good things that happen. Recognize people and point out and explain the behaviors and activities publicly so everyone understands what it took to bring about success.



## Try This: Some Quick Ideas to Teach Stakeholders

**Connect with Local Schools.** Look for educators with an interest in teaching students about participation. Work with them to develop possible projects and materials. Students can design and implement pilot projects for credit.

**Develop simple outreach materials.** Provide copies of simple materials explaining how public participation works and distribute among community leaders and organizations to use locally.



## GROUP DISCUSSION Teaching Stakeholders About Public Participation

Think about the quick ideas above to teach stakeholders. How might these work in your communities?

What are some other approaches that might work?



## GROUP DISCUSSION

### Final Thoughts About Public Participation

Think about everything we have discussed throughout this video training series.

What are the most important concepts we have learned and will be important to our future work?

What key activities and strategies do we think we can bring back to our agencies?

What additional training and support might we need moving forward?