INCREASING TRUST
THROUGH CITIZEN
ENGAGEMENT

THE LEADERS’
REPORT

Executive summary:
How can governments better connect with their citizens in today's increasingly polarised world?
In 2016, WPP Government and Public Sector Practice published *The Leaders’ Report: the future of government communication*. Its findings were based on interviews with senior government communication leaders working in 40 countries. The research concluded that despite significant geopolitical differences, respondents across all continents shared five common challenges:

1. **Declining levels of trust in government**
2. **A lack of understanding of—and an inability to connect with—increasingly fragmented audiences**
3. **An over-reliance on one-way ‘broadcast’ communication**
4. **A lack of modern—particularly digital—communication skills**
5. **Inability of government communicators to influence sufficiently within and across their organisation**

All respondents felt that rebuilding a positive and trusting relationship with citizens was critical for effective governance. Delivering effective citizen engagement was felt by many of these communicators to be central to helping governments reconnect with citizens by:

- **Restoring a sense of agency to citizens in the decision-making process**
- **Helping make the work of government more transparent**
- **Making policy the product of co-creation and collaboration**
- **Better engaging hard-to-reach audiences, ensuring there is a shared sense of common good and core narrative across society as a whole**
New global factors have intensified existing challenges

What were identified as key issues for government communication professionals in 2016 have become even more complex in 2019. Our experience in the field, complemented by our own desk research, found that the communication challenges identified two years ago have been compounded by three additional global factors:

- Geopolitical disorder has continued to produce more uncertainty for citizens. Political orthodoxies are being upturned and populism has continued to grow
- Rising living standards are contributing to a culture of individualisation that is altering the citizen-state relationship
- Technological advances are permanently disrupting how we live, work and communicate

For this second report, we spoke with 60 of the world’s most senior government communication professionals, surveyed 400 practitioners in 50 countries and 8,000 citizens across four continents, to better understand how they are dealing with these challenges, and whether citizen engagement was helping to develop and deliver better policy, and to increase trust in government.

Despite significant differences in geo-political situation, form of government, and level of government, we found that communication professionals are globally balancing an increased desire to engage with citizens against the risks that their organisations fear may emerge from any unintended consequences of increased public outreach.
The Leaders’ Report: Our Five Key Findings

We spoke to government communicators in over 50 countries and we distilled our global learnings into five key findings.

1. Willingness
   - Government communicators are willing to engage with citizens.
   - 78% of respondents had delivered some form of citizen engagement activity in the past year.
   - There is a belief that engagement can generate support for government policy.
   - 75% of respondents believe that policies delivered through citizen engagement are more likely to be supported by citizens.
   - When done well, respondents feel that citizen engagement can also build trust in government.

‘Citizen engagement by definition should build trust and add value to the mechanisms government uses to deliver policy.’
Communication Leader, Australasia

2. Confidence
   - However there is a lack of confidence in how governments implement engagement activities.
   - Barriers include:
     - Risk aversion
     - Unwillingness to devolve power to citizens
     - Concern over unpredictable outcomes
   - As a result, citizen engagement often does not move beyond the level of soliciting opinions.
   - 77% of organisations asked citizens for their opinions
   - 11% of organisations allowed citizens to decide how policies are made and/or budgets are spent
   - 7% of organisations asked citizens to make a decision on its behalf
   - So communicators are often gathering opinions that will have no tangible impact on policy.

‘There is a fear within the organisation of a lack of control. Listening and engaging means we may lose control.’
Communication Leader, Western Europe
Governments are not committing to following through on the input of citizens. Only 8% of respondents said that their organisation always commits to acting on the public’s opinions before running a citizen engagement programme.

Politicians and policymakers are unwilling to implement the findings of citizen engagement activities. ‘The problem is not that people don’t trust governments, but governments don’t trust people.’ Communication Leader, Western Europe

Only 46% of respondents said their organisation had the insights and research to evaluate the effectiveness of their programming.

Communications professionals do not always have the resources to deliver effective citizen engagement. 56% of respondents said they needed to invest more in citizen engagement.

There are often more organisational challenges too. Biggest challenges - Top 3

- Balancing the needs of citizens, stakeholders and decision makers 44%
- Lack of budget 36%
- Overcoming bureaucracy 26%

The combination of process and resource hurdles means that many programmes fall short. Only 39% of respondents felt engagement activities were coordinated across the organisation.

Failures in activity design meant that those affected by a potential policy were often unable to participate in engagement activities. Only 36% of respondents surveyed said that affected citizens could always get involved in engagement activities.

While citizens want to engage on issues that are meaningful to them, they do not want to be consulted on every issue. ‘All public issues can be opened for citizen engagement. However, if you consult the citizenry about topics they ignore, you will probably get a useless answer.’ Communication Leader, Western Europe

Sometimes it’s not clear to citizens how influential their input will be. 85% of respondents stated that citizens are not always clear on their level of influence.
Conclusions

Our findings show that government communication professionals around the world face a consistent set of challenges. The findings have led us to four distinct conclusions.

1. Citizen engagement is under-resourced and under-funded
   - Citizen engagement is widely endorsed in principle, but is often practised as a stand-alone listening exercise that fails to impact policy
   - Organisations do not resource citizen engagement activities properly
   - There remain significant capability gaps

2. Citizen engagement is always possible but not always desireable
   - Citizen engagement activities have been successfully run in all areas of policy
   - Governments need to choose engagement opportunities strategically
   - Governments should only pursue opportunities that can impact policy
   - Public organisations need to assess whether they have the capacity to effectively deliver programmes before undertaking them

3. Citizen engagement has unfulfilled potential
   - Most citizen engagement activities are not influencing policy
   - The lack of evaluation makes defining success challenging
   - There is a lack of strategic frameworks to help governments understand how citizen engagement can build more trusting relationships between citizen and state

4. Citizen engagement can make relationships between the citizen and the state worse as well as better
   - A lack of commitment and action following citizen engagement risks such activities being perceived by citizens, stakeholders and the media as a PR exercise
   - Not engaging audiences affected by policy decisions will increase perceptions that governments and public bodies are out of touch and disinterested
   - Citizens increasingly expect authorities to engage them in user-centric and relevant ways that challenge traditional government communication practices
We have identified three groups of factors that government communicators and policy makers should consider when setting out to engage citizens. For more detail on these factors, the drivers behind them, and to access and read the full report, please visit:

govtpracticewpp.com/leaders-report-2019

How can we help?

We work with our government clients across the world on the next generation of public policy challenges. We help them to deliver effective outcomes by putting the citizen at the heart of every solution, driving public satisfaction and increasing public trust.

We create high-performing public communication functions, putting in place the strategy, people, processes, structures and tools for success.

- Benchmarking how your organisation is performing against global best practice and your peers, using The Leaders’ Report global dataset
- Strategy planning and development to articulate a clear purpose and objectives for communication, monitored against relevant KPIs with rigorous evaluation processes
- Citizen engagement evaluation and consultancy to quantitatively analyse how well citizens are connected to government, and to identify the greatest opportunities to impact them
- Skills, process and structure audits to identify gaps in capability, now and for the future
- Training to develop specific skills including behavioural insight, citizen engagement, digital communication, social media, analytics and evaluation

To discuss improving the performance of your public sector communication function, please contact Sean Larkins, Director of Consulting & Capability,
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WPP is a creative transformation company creating transformative ideas and outcomes for its clients through an integrated offer of communications, experience, commerce and technology.

The Government & Public Sector Practice advises policymakers and public sector communication leaders on strategy, innovation, capability development and global best practice. We partner with governments in over 70 countries on the policy challenges where communication can have the greatest impact:

- Behaviour Change
- Citizen Engagement & Participation
- Digital Government
- Place Marketing
- Public Sector Recruitment
- Communications Capability Development

We believe that governments today cannot achieve their public policy goals without effective communications. Our team of senior consultants connects clients with the best ideas and expertise in WPP’s global network. We invest continuously to advance our thinking and evidence on the strategic use of communication.

Contact us to discuss a strategic communication challenge, improving the performance of a public sector communication team, or finding the right team within WPP for a specific brief.
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