

Engagement that shares influence: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, co-design

Five levels of influence, from informing people about a decision to designing it with them. Choose one honestly, say it plainly, and match the supports, compensation, and report-back to it.

Why it matters

The most common harm in engagement is asking for input that cannot change anything. Naming the level of influence protects trust and tells people what their time is worth.

Content

Inform. You tell people what is happening and why. Appropriate when the decision is already made. Say so.

Consult. You ask for input and decide. Appropriate when choices are open and you will explain what you did with the input.

Involve. People work with you throughout and their concerns shape the options. Appropriate when the decision affects them directly and the timeline allows.

Collaborate. People share in developing options and in the decision. Appropriate when you can share authority and want the result to be owned together.

Co-design. People with lived experience lead the design with you. Appropriate when the service is theirs and you are prepared to change how it works.

For any level, plan these. Begin before the decision is fixed. Identify who is affected and who is missing. Understand prior contacts so you do not repeat requests or extract labor. Address compensation, language, disability access, format, schedule, setting, technology, and trusted messenger. Document what was heard, what changed, what could not change, and why. Assign an owner for the ongoing relationship.

Tribal Nations. Do not treat Tribal consultation as community engagement. Sovereignty and government-to-government responsibilities have separate sources, roles, and routing. Contact the Office of Indian Policy or your Tribal liaison first.

Next steps

- **Community engagement or co-design (Practice path)** — program page </practice/gp-3>
- **Report back on what was heard and what changed** — program page </library/ja-report-back>
- **Partner map** — program page </library/ja-stakeholder-map>

Practice paths this supports

- Community engagement or co-design effort