

Principles of Open Dialogue

Open Government aims at strengthening governance by promoting greater transparency, accountability, and public engagement, especially through the use of digital tools. A growing number of Canadian governments define their approach through three streams: Open Data, Open Information and Open Dialogue.

The first two commit a government to making its data and information reserves publicly available and easily accessible. Open data improves accountability by providing evidence for decisions. Open information improves transparency by allowing people to see what is happening inside the walls of government.

But openness also involves a willingness to entertain new ideas. If traditional consultation gives participants an opportunity to state their views on an issue, open dialogue engages citizens, stakeholders, other governments, or even different sections of a single government, in respectful discussions of important issues or goals.

Participants work together to reframe issues, identify priorities, assess evidence, make trade-offs and find solutions. Open dialogue strengthens decision-making by ensuring different options are considered, bringing expertise and experience to bear on complex issues, and helping to build public trust and support for decisions.

Open dialogue thus is a different type of engagement process from traditional consultation. It follows different rules and provokes different expectations and behaviour among the participants. The principles in this document articulate some of these differences and set clear standards for governments and participants alike in the design and execution of open dialogue processes. However, they stop short of providing prescriptions on implementation.

For example, process planners often agree that an “inclusive” process should be designed to include individuals or organizations with a stake in the issue, while disagreeing on how this should be put into practice.

While debates over implementation are important and necessary, the principles here avoid such commitments. They remain at a higher level of generality in order to win broad support from governments, civil society, the private sector, and citizens. They are also a work in progress and are expected to evolve and change over time.

Open dialogue processes should:

1 Prioritize design

1A Set clear goals

The goals of the process should be clear, relevant and achievable. Timelines should be realistic.

1B Choose the right process-type

Information sharing, consultation, and dialogue are different kinds of processes that are suited to different tasks. When designing a process, the process-type should fit the task.

1C Design to fit the context

Open dialogue processes are not one-size-fits-all. A single process may include multiple dialogue streams or different ways of engaging at different stages. The needs of the process change along with the context - which can also change. Every process and each stage should be designed and revised with careful attention to the surrounding circumstances and constraints, and open to adjustment as needed.

1D Set clear boundaries on decision-making

The scope or boundaries of the decisions participants are invited to consider should be clearly defined so participants know what is on the table and what is not.

1E Communicate openly and transparently

At the outset of a process, governments should ensure that relevant information is easily accessible; and they should explain how contributions and insights will be used in its own decision-making. At the close of a process, governments should report back to the public on how the results were considered and used. Governments should be willing to openly discuss the process and its design throughout.

1F Measure and evaluate effectively

Appropriate measures and indicators should be in place to assess the progress and results of a process. Governments should carefully monitor each stage of the process and be open to adjustment to ensure objectives are met.

2 Engage the community

2A Be inclusive

The range of participants should reflect and fairly represent the affected stakeholders and diversity of views and interests around the topic without discrimination.

2B Explain the process

Process leaders should explain to participants how the process will unfold, including the objectives, the participants' roles, the different stages, uses of special tools and approaches, timelines, and expected outcomes.

2C Validate the process

The integrity of the process should be discussed with participants before the dialogue begins and should be revisited during the process as required.

2D Be open and respectful

Governments and participants alike should be forthright about their views, while expressing them in a respectful, honest and courteous way. Each participant should listen to and consider the views of others.

2E Make the process accessible

Barriers to participation should be removed to ensure people of all abilities, locations, and backgrounds can participate fully in the process.

3 Lead change and transformation

3A Take a government-wide approach

Governments should champion open dialogue as a key tool for transforming government and establishing a culture based on openness, learning, risk-taking, dialogue, and collaboration.

3B Commit to continuous improvement

Governments should commit to continuously improve their knowledge and skills in public engagement. They should continue to experiment with new methods and tools to increase the reach, depth and accessibility of engagement processes.

3C Provide the leadership

Open dialogue requires committed and engaged leadership. Decision-makers from both the political and public service levels have critical roles to play and they must work together to ensure a process succeeds.

3D Publicize engagement

Governments should use a variety of easy-to-access tools and channels to ensure that the public is aware of engagement opportunities that may be of interest to them.