*US Digital Service logo: a blue and white striped shield with white stars and wings
*

USDS equity delivery Team

Participation Spectrum

A 60-minute exercise and framework to proactively assess how impactful a team is being in its participation and identify opportunities for increasing public participation and community engagement

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# Overview

*Participation Spectrum* is a 60-minute exercise that utilizes the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, an internationally recognized framework government entities use to structure public participation engagements. It has been adapted by US Digital Service to encourage a conversation about how to increase public participation to co-develop services with the public.

This tool introduces foundational elements of equitable customer experience so those teams can plan meaningful, continuous feedback and partnership with the communities and stakeholders they serve across all touchpoints.

At this time, Participation Spectrum is limited as a conversation framework. We encourage you to pair it with other frameworks and measures around engagement, and to provide feedback as we iterate on this tool.

The objectives for this exercise are to:

* Provide a lightweight framework for planning how to build relationships and empower your stakeholders.
* Provide a shared language for the various kinds of stakeholder engagement and empowerment you can implement in your project.
* Spark conversation around metrics for measuring participation in project and design engagement strategies

Through this exercise, you will:

* Assess the overall process for how stakeholders were included in your project and at what phase.
* Determine the overall integrity of how stakeholders were invited to engage.
* Think critically about the unintentional burden on stakeholders' participation in your project and how to relieve this burden in the future.

## How might we use this?

Teams may find it helpful to use this tool to prompt essential conversations, uncover held assumptions, and facilitate more informed decision-making. We recommend using the output with a data scientist or analyst to identify short, medium and long-term measures suitable to your project. A worksheet to accompany this exercise is included in the Appendix.

Participation Spectrum Framework

## How meaningful is the engagement to the Partner?

How easy is it for the Partner to participate?

How is this a positive, meaningful experience for the Partner?

How demanding is participating for the partner?

## How is the Partner engaged?

To assess this, look at *how* the Partner is invited to participate. Select any categories that describe how they were engaged.

**Inform**  
“We will keep you informed?”

**Consult**  
“We will keep you informed, listen to your feedback, and let you know how your input influenced the decision?”

**Involve**  
“We will work with you to ensure your input is reflected in the alternatives we develop, and let you know how your input influenced the decision.”

**Collaborate**  
“We will incorporate your input into the alternatives we develop, and into the final decision to the maximum extent possible.”

**Resolve**  
“We will go with whatever you decide.”

## When does the team engage the Partner?

To assess this, look at *when* in the project the Partner is invited to participate. Select any categories that describe when they were engaged.  
  
**Before communicating the solution**   
The team answers, “How will we **explain the solution to the audience**?”  
  
**Before deciding how to implement the solution**   
The team answers, “How will **the solution be created and supported behind the scenes**, and **who will create it**?”  
  
**Before deciding the design of the solution** The team answers with input from the Partner, “What should the **finer details of the solution look like**? How will **the audience experience** it?”  
  
**Before identifying the solution**The team answers with input from the Partner, “What kind of thing should we create to solve the problem? What **needs to exist when all is said and done**?”  
  
**Before deciding how to define success**   
The team answers with input from the Partner, “What are the goals and objectives we seek? What does **success look like and how will we know we achieved it**?”  
 **Before deciding how to frame the problem** The Partner and the team answer together, “What is the most important or pressing issue we’ve identified? What is the **crux of the problem we want to change**?”

**Before deciding what problem to prioritize** The Partner and the team answer together, “Of all the issues we can focus on, **which one should we focus on now**?

Participation at a Glance

# Participation Spectrum

## Purpose: How are Partners engaged?

Look across your touchpoints for all Partners. Select the category where you have centered the majority of your engagement. For any engagements at Collaborate or Involve, circle that category.

Inform

Consult

Involve

Collaborate

Resolve

## Timing: When does the team engage Partners?

Look across your touchpoints for all Partners. Select the category where you began most of your engagement.

Before deciding how to implement solution

Before deciding the design of solution

Before identifying solution

Before deciding how to define success

Before deciding how to frame the problem

Before deciding problem to prioritize

## Burden: How is the engagement meaningful to Partners?

Your selection here should be based on Partner response. If you didn’t evaluate with your Partners, select the appropriate category based on observation and document how you could measure this in the future.

### How easy is it to learn about the engagement activities?

How were Partners invited into the project? How inclusive and discoverable were opportunities for Partners?

Very easy

Easy

Neutral

Difficult

Very difficult

### How positive do activities make participants feel?

Even if the project wasn’t a success, how did Partners walk away feeling about the engagement?

Poor

Fair

Good

Very Good

Excellent

### How easy is it to fulfill the demands of participating?

How inclusive were we in extending the opportunity to Partners who might have barriers such as a disability? Did we make an intent to make sure that the opportunity could be accessed in a reasonable way to meet the needs of Partners?

No barriers

Some barriers: No more than 2 barriers that do not include Accessibility or a Protected Class

Moderate barriers: At least 1 barrier that includes Accessibility at a high impact or a Protected Class

Many barriers: 1-3 barriers that include Accessibility at high or critical impact or a Protected Class

Excessive barriers: 1+ barriers that include Accessibility at potentially harmful impact or a Protected Class

## Commitments

### What are the greatest gaps in each category?

### What plays can we make to move the needle for a single partner? Are there any plays we could make to move the needle across multiple partners or stakeholders?

### What realistic short-term commitments could we prioritize to increase public participation in our project based on the plays we discussed today?

### What single realistic medium or long-term commitment could we prioritize to increase public participation in our project based on the plays we discussed today?

# Appendix A – Participation Spectrum Supplements

Participation Spectrum is intended to be modular to offer flexibility in planning and evaluating participation and engagement internally.

We’ve included a supplemental one-pager to better assess Participation Spectrum at a high level and an additional worksheet that can be used in tandem with [*Participation at a Glance*](#_Participation_Spectrum)for planning or more granular evaluation.

[**Partner**](#_Purpose:_How_are)

A worksheet to document activities that are planned or that have occurred for a specific partner. This can be used with Participation at a Glance for granular conversations around where engagement is happening well and where it can be improved.

[**What is Participation Spectrum?**](#_What_do_we)

A standalone document that lays out the framework with considerations for evaluation.

## Additional ways to utilize this tool

### The Pulse Check

**Best for:** Teams that have frequent stakeholder engagement touchpoints and have more flexibility over the design of the engagement than the timing of the engagement or the extent to which feedback is used.

**How it Works:** Offer partners the 3 Burden Battery questions after every public touchpoint, including consultations, social media posts, meetings, etc. After the team completes each touchpoint the Partner, look at the newly collected Burden Battery data to identify strengths and opportunities for growth.

**Value-Add:** Allows for fast feedback on a team’s approach to stakeholder engagement, providing basic data points about the ease of discovering the engagement touchpoint, the emotional impact of the touchpoint, and the logistical difficulty of engaging.

**Ways to Enhance It:** Add an option for open-ended comments to gather more detailed feedback.

### The Relationship Tracker

**Best for:** Agencies or teams whose success depends on maintaining strong relationships with particular stakeholder communities.

**How it Works:**Every time a team reports to Partners any decisions they’ve made, ask Partners the Purpose Battery question to evaluate the touchpoints where they had previously engaged with those decisions. For each Purpose level (e.g. “Inform”, “Consult”, ... “Empower”), identify the lengths of time during which no touchpoints exist at or above that level. [Example: a 1/1/24 “Consult” touchpoint, followed by a 3/1/24 “Inform” touchpoint, followed by a 5/1/24 “Consult” touchpoint, indicates a 4-month “Consult” gap.] Analyze those gaps to assess the strength of relationships. For the “Relationship Tracker” approach, we recommend paying particular attention to the analysis for the “Consult” and “Involve” levels.

**Value-Add:**Creates a simple way to measure/visualize the strength of various stakeholder relationships. Allows teams to identify stakeholder relationships that are in danger (e.g. Partners who haven’t been at least “Consulted” in 6+ months).

### The Due Diligence

**Best for:** Teams that want to make sure every major project decision reflects sufficient input from stakeholders.

**How it Works:** Choose a Purpose Battery level (e.g. “Consult”) that your team will designate as its minimum engagement baseline. At each stage in the project process (represented by the Timing Battery categories), once the critical decisions for that stage have been made, ask Partners the Purpose Battery with respect to the decisions in that specific stage. Keep track of which project stages meet or exceed the designated minimum engagement baseline, and which do not.

**Value-Add:** Documents evidence of meaningful stakeholder engagement at every major decision point in the project process — both for internal and external reporting.

**Ways to Enhance It**: Choose minimum acceptable performance baselines for selected items of the Burden Battery, and administer those Burden Battery items to Partners alongside the Purpose Battery. Keep track of which project stages meet the selected baseline of burden reduction.

Participation spectrum

Partner Worksheet

## Purpose: How are Partners engaged?

List out your opportunities. Categorize each opportunity by the type of engagement you performed.

## Timing: When does the team engage Partners?

Look at the opportunities you listed above. Indicate where you began most of your engagement.

## Burden: How was engagement meaningful to Partners?

Look at the opportunities you listed above and consider the types of unintentional burdens imposed by each touchpoint. Indicate how you made the opportunity discoverable, how you measured the quality or satisfaction with the engagement by the participant, and how you addressed barriers to participation.

### How easy is it to learn about the engagement activities?

### How positive do activities make participants feel?

### How easy is it to fulfill the demands of participating?

What is Participation Spectrum

Participation Spectrum captures how we engage the communities and stakeholders we serve and the degree to which those communities were empowered by their participation.

## What do we mean by public participation?

Public participation in government means any process that seeks or facilitates input from the public in government decision-making, particularly from those most affected or interested.

## What do we mean by community engagement?

Community engagement is a specific form of public participation where we build trust-based, mutually beneficial relationships with communities. This includes historically unserved and underserved communities left out of government decision-making processes.

## Participation Spectrum Dimensions

### Purpose: How are partners engaged?

Consider the way information was exchanged between the team, communities, and stakeholders and the extent to which input from stakeholders influenced the project team's decisions.

### Timing: When does the team start engaging participants?

Reflect on how inclusive the approach for engagement was to communities and stakeholders in defining the problem, scoping the solution, and contributing to the outcome of the service.

### Burden: How easy is it to learn about the engagement activities?

Reflect on the overall burden of learning about how to participate in an activity. Critically consider what access means in terms of the relevance and benefits of participating from a community perspective. **Assess difficulty to discover the opportunity.**

### Burden: How positive do activities make participants feel?

Reflect to what extent participation may have introduced distress to the stakeholder or community. Consider the extent to which you collected sentiment and acted on it as part of your planned activities. **Assess the quality of the engagement.**

### Burden: How easy is it to fulfill the demands of participating?

Consider the full compliance cost of participating in activities as a community or stakeholder. Reflect on the logistics associated with participating holistically; for example, providing information, communicating with parties, and attending meetings and the total time commitment this incurred. **Assess how barriers impacted inclusion during the engagement.**

# Appendix B: Discussion Guide

## OVERVIEW OF THE TOOL (10 min)

Today, we will talk about how well we've engaged with the community that our project serves and how we can improve. This work is encouraged and inspired by several White House Executive Orders, including EOs on equity and customer experience across the federal government. The Participation Spectrum makes this policy guidance practical through a conversation around concrete strategies for implementation and evaluation.

### Ice Breaker (2 min, 6 min Reflection + Share Out)

Let's kick off our conversation with an icebreaker.

Take one minute to share one decision that you did not own but were invited to contribute to. How did it make you feel? We'll share briefly in a moment.

### Understanding norms (1 min)

MODERATOR'S NOTE: Ideally display these on paper or digitally with an approved implement.

As we go through this exercise, I encourage you all to:

* Be as present as possible
* Engage in both personal reflection & discussion
* Stay curious and open-minded

We've also provided some basic tenets around inclusive and considerate participation. Let's go through those quickly.

1. Be Optimistic  
   Assume the best, and believe in the possible to make things so
2. Collaborate  
   We are most powerful together, and we're here to learn how to achieve this with one another.
3. Embrace ambiguity and discomfort.  
   Let's get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
4. Learn from failure  
   Give one another the grace to fail and ask for forgiveness when needed.
5. Take ownership  
   Owning what we say and do builds collective responsibility with one another and the people we serve
6. Talk less, listen more.  
   Let's make things happen by listening to one another actively and avoiding over-intellectualizing
7. Lessons leave, stories stay.  
   Respect the privacy of individuals' personal information. Broader takeaways and reflections can be shared outside this space as needed.

Is there anything missing or our team wants to change before we begin?

### Understanding objectives (1 min)

Through the Participation Spectrum, you will:

* consider how methods for engaging with your stakeholders can positively impact your ability to deliver equitably
* brainstorm some ways to improve engagement with your stakeholders beyond user research to achieve equity
* commit to one or more changes in the way you facilitate engagement with your stakeholders to achieve better outcomes

## INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE (10 min)

### Introducing the dimensions and purpose of the exercise (5 min)

How we plan activities around participation and engagement is critical to building constituent and public trust and satisfaction with the communities we serve. We'll use the Participation Spectrum worksheet to capture our individual impressions for engaging with the public and then facilitate a conversation.

Your worksheet contains multiple questions that each correspond to a participation dimension. We’ve included an FAQ sheet with your worksheet. I’ll give you a moment to read through it. Raise your hand if you have any questions.

### Getting started on the individual exercise (5 minutes)

Each of you has a worksheet. Circle the category. you would give for each of the questions.

For example, for the first dimension, When does the team begin engaging participants? If the first time you engaged with this stakeholder was to understand the reception or use of the solution, you would circle 4.

You have 5 minutes to capture your category. for each dimension. Raise your hand to signal you are done.

## GALLERY WALK AND DISCUSSION (40 min)

### Prompting reflection during a gallery walk of team responses (10 min)

Now, we're going to let's take a moment to look through everyone's worksheets.

Prompt: What strikes you most about the results of this exercise?  
Prompt: Where are the greatest gaps in category.?

### Connecting opportunities to the Problem-To-Be-Solved (15 min)

Prompt: What plays can we make to move the needle with this stakeholder?

### Commitments (15 min)

We will close out our time today by considering what commitment we could make as a team to uplift this stakeholder's participation and overall experience.

Prompt: What realistic short-term commitments could we prioritize to increase public participation in our project based on the plays we discussed today?

Prompt: What single realistic medium or long-term commitment could we prioritize to increase public participation in our project based on the plays we discussed today?

## CLOSEOUT

Today's conversation belongs to your team: none of your responses will be accessed or shared, and only notes that you agreed to be taken as a team will be provided back to you. Anything you've shared today in conversation will remain private.

Great job, team!