Active Listening Panel

Framework

Contents

1. Introduction

Active Listening Panels (ALPs) are an engagement tool that were created as a way of actively listening[1] to what matters to key stakeholders.

The aim of each ALP is to find out what is important to key stakeholders, how it relates to our project and how they feel about it. Panels do not aim to find or present solutions but instead will aim to understand the landscape.

ALPs are part of a journey for key and strategic stakeholders and should be thought of as part of an holistic approach for projects in nurturing flourishing and fruitful relationships with these key potential influencers.

6 key active
Learning skills

Pay attention   Withold judgement   Reflect   Clarify   Summarise   Share

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[1] "Active listening refers to a pattern of listening that keeps you engaged with your conversation partner in a positive way. It is the process of listening attentively while someone else speaks, paraphrasing and reflecting back what is said, and withholding judgment and advice.

When you practice active listening, you make the other person feel heard and valued. In this way, active listening is the foundation for any successful conversation." Verywellmind.com

2. Purpose

Active Listening Panels (ALPs) are a tool that move a project's stakeholder engagement approach further towards a model where relationship capital[2] is built on listening to audiences and demonstrating responsive understanding of what matters to them. This approach moves a project's engagement from a typical broadcast-heavy model and further towards a reflective dialogue with stakeholders in which both parties are invested and benefit from value exchange[3]. In this way, the primary purpose of ALPs is as a stakeholder engagement opportunity to build and develop relationship capital for the project with stakeholders identified as critical and influential.

The secondary purpose of ALPs is to provide immediate dynamic stakeholder feedback and intelligence into the project team. This approach allows for all functions across the project team to respond to emerging themes and to provide opportunities for content to be tailored to address issues that stakeholders say matter to them.

ALPs should be conducted in line with organisational and project values and are a tool with which project teams can demonstrate those core values to stakeholders in order to strengthen relationships.

Level	Characterisation
Broadcasting (level 1)	"Here's what we are doing"
Consulting (level 2)	"What do you think about what we are doing?"
Collaborating (level 3)	"Please get involved in what we are doing"
Co-producing (level 4)	"Let's do it together"

Table 1. Engagement level descriptors

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[2] Stakeholder Management – How much relationship capital do you have? – López, Rick, and Streubel, Boston Consulting Group

[3] Rethinking value exchange – Ian Stockley

3. Method

3.1 Timing

Participants will be invited to join a one-hour session and content will be planned for 45 mins to allow time for joining and closing the session.

3.2 Technology

Each panel will be delivered via online video-conferencing software where it's possible to minimise travel time and demonstrate sustainable values.

3.3 Participants

Up to six identified strategically important stakeholders will be personally invited to attend. (A stakeholder-mapping exercise should be used to identify the most appropriate stakeholders.)

3.4 Running order

3.4.1 Welcome and introductions – the facilitator (or project sponsor as appropriate) will welcome all participants, thank them for their attendance, briefly describe the purpose and theme of the panel and then will ask all participants to introduce themselves.

3.4.2 Unpacking the topic – the facilitator will encourage participants to take a philosophical approach to unpack the topic and discuss their range of viewpoints. During this phase of the ALP the facilitator will focus on generating conversation and discussion between participants through questioning and follow up prompting. Throughout the panel to ensure clarity the facilitator will use reflection to check understanding (and enable the note taker as much clarity as possible).

3.4.3 Summarising the feedback - towards the end of the panel (as directed in the Question Set) the Note Taker will ensure that participants are focused on consolidating the feedback that they would like to represent a summary of their discussions.

3.5 Questions

Up to four primary questions will be used to encourage participants to unpack the theme/topic of the ALP and discuss their viewpoints. These primary questions will be open and/or reflective to encourage deeper thinking and exploration of the topic/theme.

Primary question examples:
- In your view, how might this project impact on …?
- What factors do you envisage having the biggest impact on this project's stated outcomes in the next three months?
- How do you think this project could include those people in the community who are reluctant to engage with us?

- What have been the biggest, unexpected benefits of this project from your perspective to date?
- What concerns you most about… and how do you think we might address those concerns?

Prompt questions will be used to move the discussions forward, create clarity and generate discussion.

Prompt question examples:
- Why did you decide to take that approach?
- What are your thoughts about the effectiveness of that method?
- Have others in the panel had the same experience?
- Could you expand on what you experienced?
- Do others in the panel have different experiences?
- Could you talk us through your experience?
- What did you feel was your most important learning from that situation?
- What have you changed as a result of that knowledge?

Reflection will be used to check understanding sparingly as necessary throughout the panel. (Over-use of reflective questioning can make participants feel that the engagement is staged and un-natural but is important for use when discussions are unclear).

Reflection examples:
- Have I understood that what you felt was important in that situation was…?
- So, what you're saying is that … was the key factor in that decision, is that right?
- Can I check that you felt that … was the standout learning from that?

3.6 Analysis

Towards the end of the panel participants will be asked to discuss and agree the notes that will form the basis of the Active Listening Panel Intelligence Brief content. Notes will be developed during the panel based on the discussions that take place within the panel. In this way the facilitator and note taker will avoid biasing the report with their own viewpoints and the content of the Active Listening Panel Intelligence Brief will be decided upon by participants themselves.

Reflection by the facilitator will play a part in the discussion, but the primary focus will be on gaining consensus from participants about what they would like the project team to conclude from their conversations with the team.

As detailed within the Question Set Template, the note taker will advise participants that they have moved into the conclusion phase of the ALP and that the aim of this section is to agree on the content that will be fed back into the project team. They will then use reflective questions to start the dialogue with participants and will discuss summarising wording and seek consensus from the group to refine or replace the wording to ensure that all parties are comfortable with the content (in much the same way as a facilitator of a small break-out group would do when reporting back into a larger conference room on behalf of a small group of participants).

If necessary, during this phase of the panel the use of some closed questioning may become appropriate to ensure clarity and confirmation.

For example:
- What would you want the project team to understand about what you have discussed today?
- Are we all in agreement?
- What would you want to change or include?
- How would you summarise our conversation from today's panel?
- Do you think it's important for us to include…?
- Are you content for me to reflect your conclusions relating to…?
- You said …. when discussing … do you think this should be included?
- So in conclusion, we are going to include .. .. is that correct?

3.7 Reporting

Active Listening Panel Intelligence Briefings will be between one and two A4 pages of high-level content that summarises the agreed feedback that participants have concluded during the panel.

Active Listening Panel Intelligence Briefs will be provided within an agreed period that is workable for the project team. It is suggested that this should be 5–10 working days of a panel taking place in order that they are immediate and facilitate agility.

3.8 Data storage

Project teams should consider the data policies that affect their project when developing Active Listening Panels and abide by these and all relevant legislation.

As a general rule ALPs should not be used to seek to gain any personal data or personally identifiable data. All information within Intelligence Briefings should be high level and unattributed to individuals for example using grouped feedback that is not attributable or identifiable to any individual within the panel.

4. Communication

Once the project team has considered the project communication needs with participants pre and post Active Listening Panel, the project team should create a pack of documents to share with participants that delivers consistency across all content. This might include relevant GDPR and data statements, content relating to expectation management and opportunities for an ongoing engagement journey for participants.

Pre-Active Listening Panel communication with participants

This section is a suggested list of potential pre/post communication considerations. This is not exhaustive, and project teams should plan their own stakeholder engagement journey and create documents as appropriate. Project teams should always seek advice through their own governance to ensure that all relevant legislative communication is included.

4.1 GDPR, data and confidentiality

Projects should seek advice as necessary in line with their own project governance in relation to the data and confidentiality statements that should be shared with participants.

4.2 Expectation management

Participants should be fully briefed about what to expect when attending an Active Listening Panel including a summary of the theme/topic that will be discussed and confidentiality/reporting arrangements.

For example, project teams may want to consider sending a personalised email to all participants at least 5 working days before the panel is scheduled to take place which summarises the following:
- Date, start time and finish time of ALP
- Confirmation of video-conferencing software to be used
- Topic/theme to be covered
- Relevant governance statements
- Confirmation of the purpose of the panel and confidentiality/reporting expectations
- A 'thank you' for their anticipated and valued involvement

4.3 Post-Active Listening Panel communication with participants

Participants should be followed up and their participation in an Active Listening Panel should be a step on their engagement journey with the project team.

For example, a personalised email could be sent to participants within three working days of their participation in an ALP that summarises the following:

- Thank you for their time and valued participation

- Reiteration of the purpose of the panel and confidentiality/reporting expectations
- Opportunity to continue their engagement with the project team (depending on their interest/influence this should be tailored. For example, this may be signing up for the project newsletter, or may be a follow up 1:1 meeting with a member of the project team)

5. Conclusion

5.1 Focus on listening

The Active Listening Panel is an engagement tool that focuses on building relationships with stakeholders through understanding what matters to them.

Active Listening Panels are part of a stakeholder engagement journey for key project stakeholders and should be thought of as part of the toolkit for the project team in nurturing flourishing and fruitful relationships. They should always be delivered with a planned follow up journey for participants.