

Early Listening Checklist for Complex Projects

Listen for the whispers, to avoid the shouting

Organisations that skip early listening can face hardened community positions, reactive stakeholders, and broken trust - before the project has even begun. Early listening is not consultation. It is intelligence-gathering. Ideally it happens before you commence planning engagement. And listening early is always cheaper than fixing late.

Use this checklist to assess whether your project is ready to start engagement planning - or whether critical listening groundwork is still missing.

1. Stakeholder Landscape

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|--------------------------|--|
| ☐ | We have identified all primary and secondary stakeholders - not just the obvious ones. |
| ☐ | We understand who will influence project decision making and what their current experience/relationship to the project is |
| ☐ | We understand who are the most impacted by this project, and what their current experience/relationship to the project is and who is likely to become vocal (and why). |
| ☐ | We understand who is likely to become vocal (and why). |
| ☐ | We have mapped relationships between stakeholder groups - alliances, tensions, and history. |
| ☐ | We know which communities or groups are hardest to reach and have a plan to reach them. |

2. Community and Context

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|--------------------------|---|
| ☐ | We understand the history of this issue or site for the affected community. |
| ☐ | We have reviewed any prior engagements that have already taken place and commitments that have already been made. |
| ☐ | We are aware of any community sensitivities, cultural considerations, or lived experience relevant to this project. |
| ☐ | We understand what concerns are likely to surface - before we ask. |
| ☐ | We have spoken informally with community connectors or trusted intermediaries. |

3. Organisational Readiness

☐	Leadership is set genuine and meaningful negotiables (points of influence)
☐	There is genuine willingness to adjust the project based on the agreed negotiable
☐	We have allocated time and budget to complete items 1 and 2 in this check list (ie: the early listening)
☐	The engagement team is clear on the project context and key sensitivities.
☐	We have clear internal alignment on what decisions are still open versus already made.

4. Closing the Loop

☐	We have a plan for how findings will be shared back with stakeholders.
☐	We can clearly explain how what we heard has influenced the project - or why it has not.
☐	Stakeholders will be able to see that their input was genuinely considered.
☐	We have planned for ongoing communication - not a one-off listening event.
☐	We have a process for managing expectations about what engagement can and cannot change.

How did you score?

18-21 ticked	Strong foundation. You are ready to undertake engagement planning.
11-17 ticked	Gaps exist. Address the unchecked items before engagement planning begins.
10 or under ticked	High risk. Proceeding without early listening work is likely to cost you more down the track.

Need help with early listening on a complex project?

Aha! Consulting specialises in stakeholder engagement, facilitation, communications and social licence for complex projects across government, infrastructure, and community. We work with organisations that need more than a process - they need a result.

Get in touch: www.ahaconsulting.net.au