Engaging Communities in Climate Action: Building Buy-in and Overcoming Resistance

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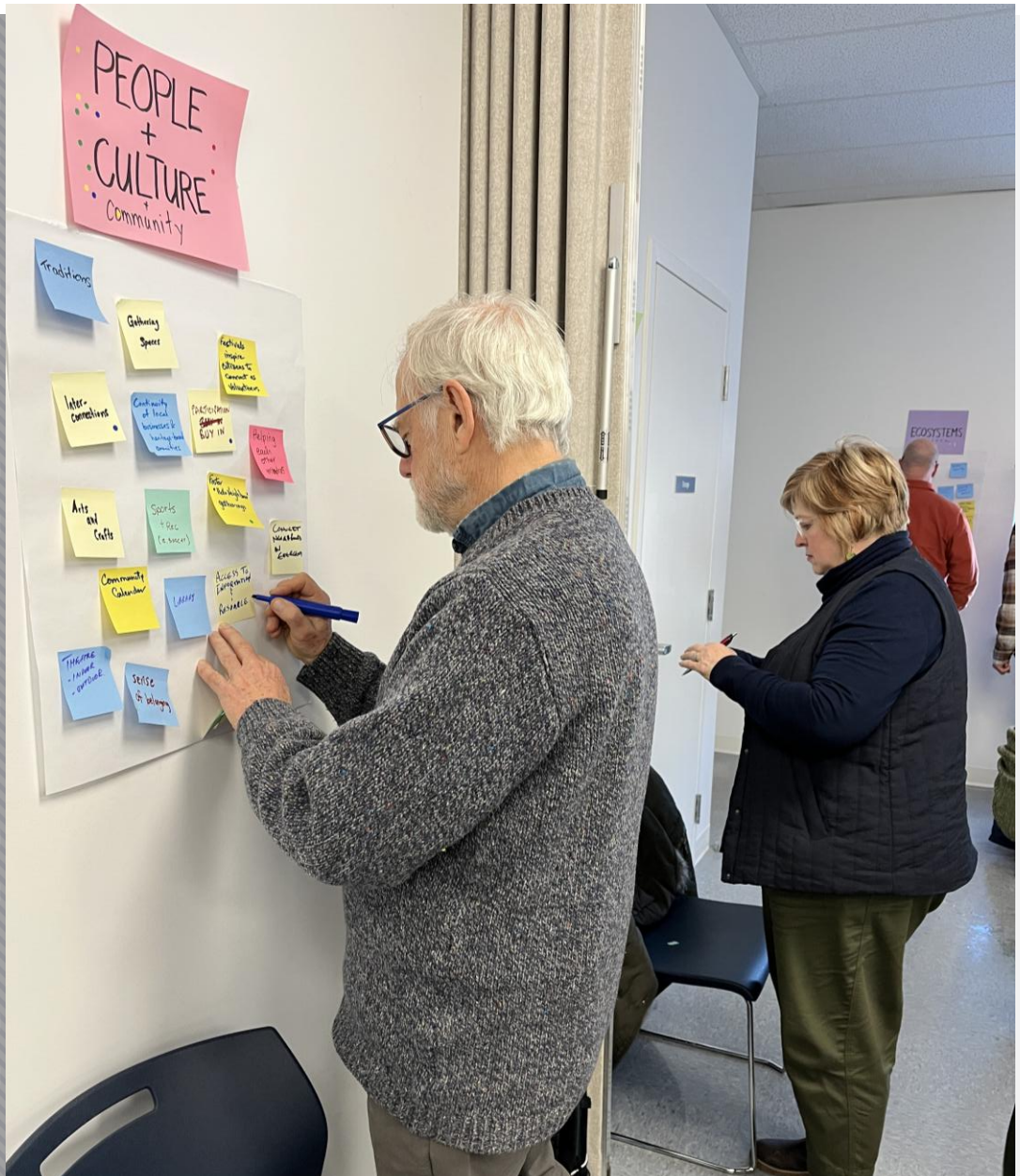
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We need to talk about the title:

"Building buy-in and overcoming resistance"



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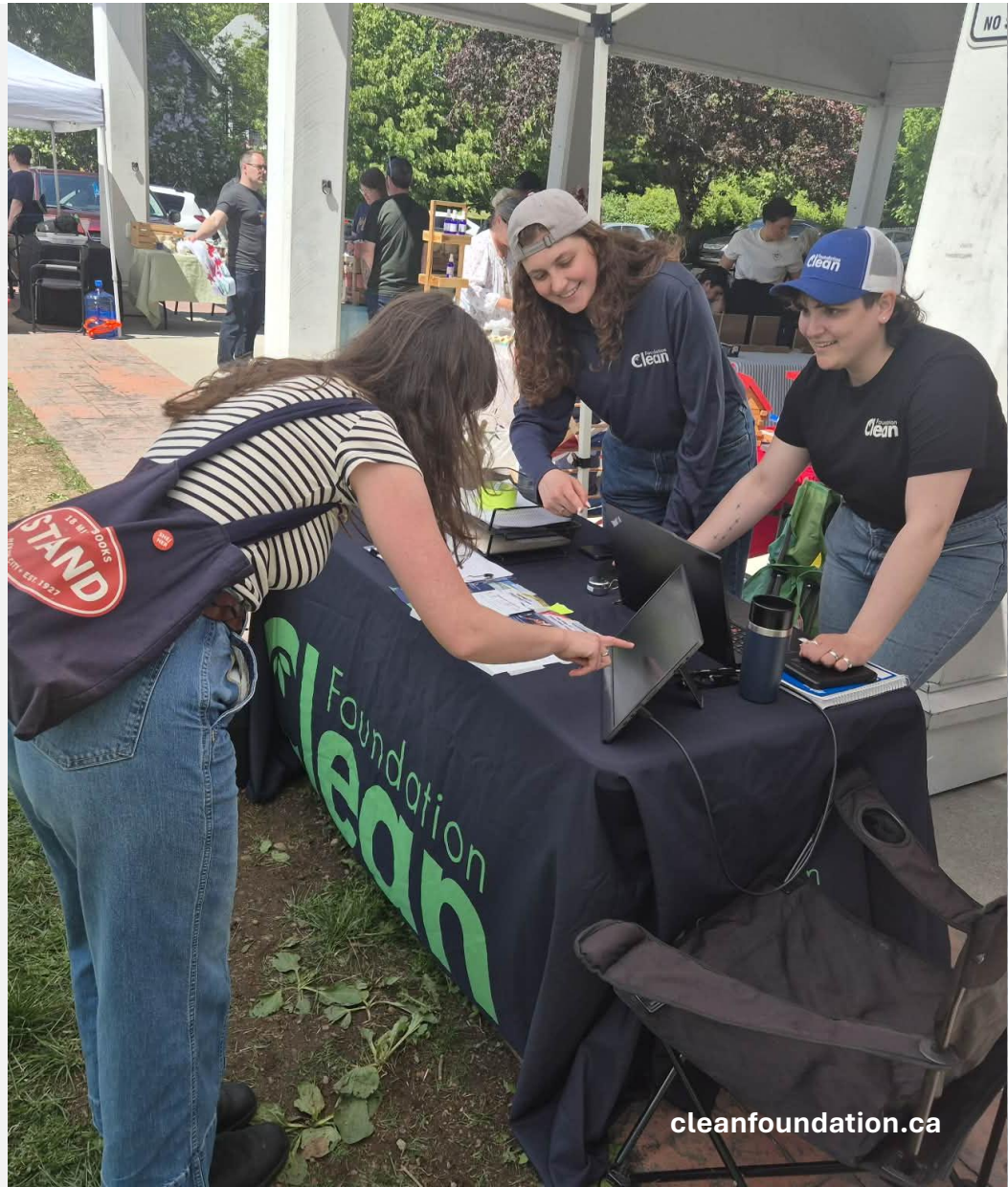
Resistance is information

Instead of asking, "*How do we **convince** them?*"
*Ask, "What is this concern **telling** us?*"

Engagement is not the same as agreement

A successful engagement process gives people a meaningful opportunity to:

- **Understand** what is being proposed.
- **Share** their knowledge and concerns.
- **See** how their input was considered.
- **Understand** how and why the final decision was made.



Session goals

During our session, we will:

1. Shift our thinking on resistance.
2. Explore what’s underneath an objection.
3. Introduce the TRUST framework.
4. Apply our learnings through practice.



What is underneath resistance?

The objection is the ***position***; meaningful engagement listens for the ***interest*** underneath it.



What might be underneath?

"I don't want a bike lane."

Possible underlying concerns:

- "I'm worried about my business."
- "Where will customers park?"
- "How will this work in winter?"
- "Does this reflect how people actually use the road?"
- "Was our input genuinely considered?"

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What to listen for:



Fairness

Who benefits, who pays, and who carries the risk?



Trust

Do people believe they will be heard and given reliable information?



Power and influence

Do people feel they have a meaningful role in decisions?



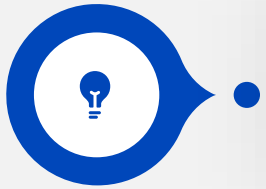
Place and identity

What familiar, valued or important part of the community may feel threatened?



Risk and uncertainty

What are people worried could go wrong? Who would face the consequences?



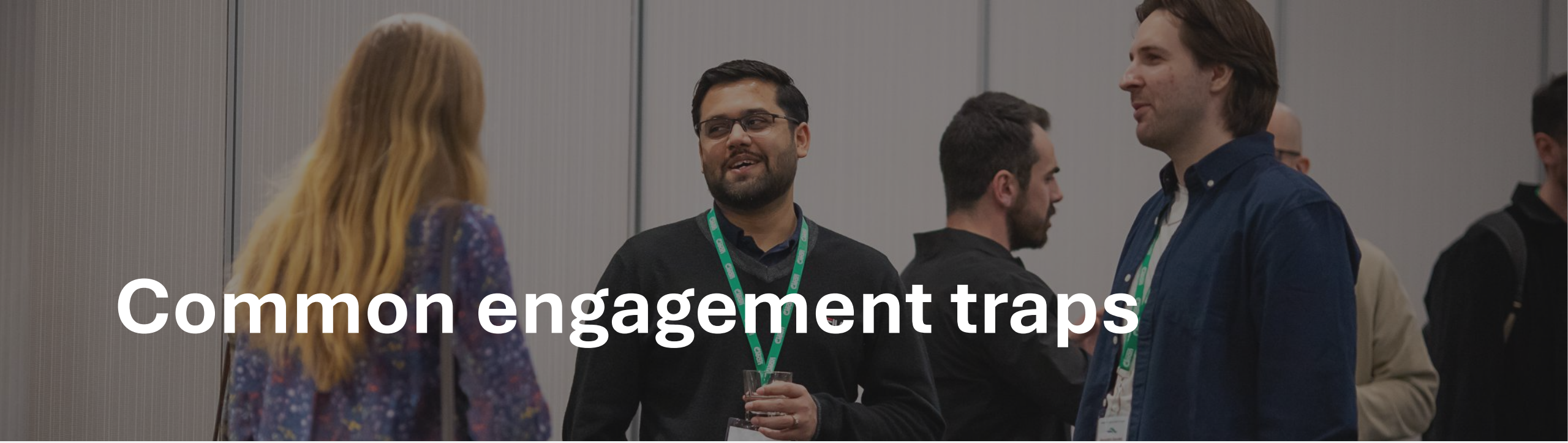
Local knowledge

Do people feel their being listened to and experience captured?



Capacity and access

Whose missing and who faces barriers to participate?



Common engagement traps

1 INFORMATION TRAP

More information doesn’t always create more understanding.

First, understand the concern, then provide the information that responds to it.

2 CONSULTATION TRAP

Offering input is not the same as creating influence.

Show what you heard, what changed/didn’t, and why.

3 TOO-LATE ENGAGEMENT TRAP

When important decisions are already made, participation can feel performative.

Engage early and be honest about what is still open to influence.

Community knowledge is technical knowledge

Technical expertise tells us:

- What the data shows.
- What standards are required.
- What solutions are technically possible.

Community expertise tells us:

- How a place functions day-to-day.
- Where problems occur and who experiences them.
- What has happened before.
- What may create support, barriers, or unintended consequences.

The TRUST approach

A practical sequence for moving from objection to understanding, connection, and meaningful participation.

T – Talk about community priorities.
R – Recognize concerns.
U – Understand before persuading.
S – Show shared priorities and benefits.
T – Track and share progress.



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What matters locally:

- Safety
- Affordability
- Reliable infrastructure
- Economic resilience
- Community well-being
- Quality of life
- Places people value

Shift the starting point:

Instead of: "How do we get people to understand the importance of climate action?"

Ask: "How does that project connect to what already matters in the community?"

T – Talk about community priorities

R – Recognize concerns

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Acknowledge before you explain:

- "I understand why the cost would be a concern."
- "It sounds like you're worried about the impact on local businesses."
- "I hear your concern about how this will work during the winter."





T – Talk about community priorities
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Position: "This project will cost a fortune."
Interest: What does "cost" mean to them?

Ask before you answer:

- "What concerns you most?"
- "Can you tell me more?"
- "What would you want us to understand?"
- "What would success look like to you?"

T – Talk about community priorities
R – Recognize concerns
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Connect the concern to a shared priority:

Instead of: "Here's why the project is good."

Try: "It sounds like we both want to make sure this project provides lasting value for the community."





T – Talk about community priorities
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Close the loop:

We heard → We considered → We changed or didn't change → Here's why → Here's what's next

Meaningful engagement does not require accepting every suggestion. It requires being transparent about how input shaped the decision.

TRUST is a guide, not a script

Adapt your approach to what the conversatin needs.

TRUST in action

"This is just another climate project that's going to cost a fortune."

Put TRUST into practice

When someone challenges your project publicly, how do you respond?

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How would you respond?

A community member says:
"This is just another climate project that's going to cost a fortune. Why don't you spend the money fixing the roads instead?"

Option A:
"Actually, that's not accurate. We've received funding for this project."

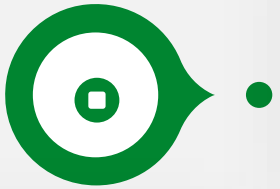
Option B:
"This project will save money over the long-term and help reduce future costs."

Option C:
"I understand why the cost would be a concern. Can you tell me more about what you're worried about?"

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What you hear is not always the underlying concern.

"This is just another climate project that's going to cost a fortune."



Option A: *Explain the funding*

"Actually, that's not accurate. We've received funding for this project."

Option B: *Explain the benefits*

"This project will save money over the long-term and help reduce future costs."





Option C: *Recognize the concern*

"I understand why the cost would be a concern. Can you tell me more about what you're worried about?"

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What would you ask next?

A community member replies:
"Well, it's just a lot of money."

Option A:
"Would it help if I explained where the funding is coming from?"

Option B:
"Did you know this project could save money over time?"

Option C:
"Can you share with me your biggest concern about the cost?"

Option D:
"What would you want the community to prioritize instead?"

Now that we understand the concern, how would you respond?

A community member replies:
"Our roads are falling apart. That's where this money should be going."

Option A:
"Road work is a separate budget issue. This funding can't be used for roads."

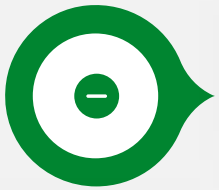
Option B:
"This project will help reduce future infrastructure costs caused by climate impacts."

Option C:
"It sounds like we both want public money to be used responsibly and existing road needs to be addressed."

Close the loop

The meeting is ending.

- **What happens next?**
- **What response meaningfully closed the loop?**



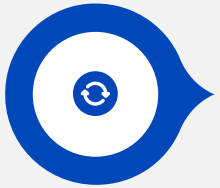
Option A:

"Thanks for your feedback."

Option B:

"We'll take that into consideration."





Option C:

"Here's what we heard, what we're able to consider, what isn't going to change, and when we'll report back."

The goal is not the perfect response

The TRUST helps us pause enough to determine what the conversation is actually about.

Role-play activity: TRUST in practice

You are not trying to:

- Win an argument.
- Deliver the perfect answer.
- Share every fact you know.
- Solve everything in one conversation.

Your goal is to ***slow down***, ***listen*** and ***understand*** what is underneath the concern before responding.



Activity instructions

1. Form a group of three.
2. Choose your roles.
3. Review your role card.

Community member:
Read your opening objection.

Elected official:
Recognize, ask and listen before responding.

Observer:
Watch for what opens or closes the conversation.

Choose your role



Elected Official

Use TRUST to uncover what's really driving the concern.



Community member

Start with your opening objective. Reveal more when the council member shows genuine curiosity.



Observer

Watch the conversation. Notice what creates openness, understanding or defensiveness.

Debrief:
what changed the conversation?



The objection is only the beginning

Understanding creates progress.
Ask what’s beneath the resistance.

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What will you do differently?

- Where might you slow down?
- What question could you ask before explaining?
- What concerns might be underneath the objection?
- How will you show people what happened with their input?

Do not try to overcome resistance.
Get curious about what it is telling you.

Thank you!

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