

Engagement Theatre Diagnostic

Theatre is usually the result of well-intentioned people designing engagement in the wrong sequence. Use this to identify and address it before trust is lost.

WARNING SIGN 1

The engagement level was chosen before objectives were clear.

You may be making a promise you cannot keep. The process will look like Involve; the outcome will feel like Consult.

Course-correction: Step back. Map the decision space before confirming the engagement level. Revise the promise to match what you can genuinely deliver.

WARNING SIGN 2

Key decisions have already been made.

The engagement cannot deliver the influence it implies. The question is whether the community knows that.

Course-correction: Be transparent about what is and isn't open. Honest Consult on a narrow space is more valuable than theatre on a wide one.

WARNING SIGN 3

There is no clear pathway from input to decision-makers.

If you cannot describe the pathway from community input to the decision-maker, neither can the community.

Course-correction: Confirm the pathway before engagement begins: who receives the analysis, by when, and how it reaches the decision-maker.

WARNING SIGN 4

The evaluation framework was designed after engagement concluded.

Success was never defined. Post-hoc metrics chosen because the process performed well against them prove nothing.

Course-correction: Define what success looks like – including what would constitute failure – before the next process begins.

WARNING SIGN 5

There is no plan to close the feedback loop.

If the plan doesn't exist at the design stage, the loop will not be closed.

Course-correction: Add Step 10 to the project plan now. Name a person. Set a deadline. Budget the communication.

THE STRUCTURAL FIX

Theatre is most reliably prevented by completing Steps 1–4 before any community-facing activity begins: decision space, constraints, objectives, and an engagement level that reflects what the process can actually deliver.