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Stakeholder engagement – applying insights from neuroscience

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Understanding that neural pathways reflect our experiences, and shape our perception of 'facts', provides valuable insight into how more effective 'stakeholder engagement' can be run.

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In 2008, Western Power embarked on the public consultation and approvals phase of the largest transmission line project undertaken in Western Australia in 20 years. Two plausible routes had been identified for the powerlines upon which the community and affected stakeholders would be consulted.

Yet Western Power elected not to take a conventional 'decide and defend' approach – telling stakeholders of their plans, then mitigating the worst effects arising from stakeholder feedback, thereby adding time and cost to the project. Instead they met with people along the transmission line corridor to understand their interests, needs and places of value. By mapping that information, new insights and cost effective options emerged to shape route selection, while preserving stakeholders needs and values. This 'co-design' approach was so effective that no objections were received during a period of public exposure, and the government deemed an environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not required. Stakeholders were happy, and Western Power reduced their development time, cost and business risk by avoiding what could have been an adversarial process.

Why was this result achieved? The fields of behaviour change and neuroscience provide some insights.

Each of us sees the world through the lenses of our values and beliefs, which are shaped by our life experiences and people we trust. What we understand to be 'true' is scripted into our brains as physical neural pathways, which are reinforced by repetition of thoughts and behaviours. Stronger mental scripts are biologically useful because they reduce the energy our brain consumes.

Put another way, each person holds their own 'truths'. Changing these truths – about how the world works and what is possible – involves physically rewiring our brains, which literally takes energy.

When people are faced with change, it often creates fear. This triggers a primal survival instinct that narrows our focus and makes it hard to take in new information or ideas. Conversely, when people are happy, feel in control, and deal with people they trust, they are

far more disposed to inquiry, learning and exploration. The ‘aha’ moment of insight is one of the most powerful and enjoyable learning experiences. Furthermore, people experience a rise in status when they are learning and contributing to something of which they feel pa

The key point is this: people make sense of the world through their own mental stories, and in order to see benefit in change, people need to see themselves as part of a new emerging story. We are biologically wired to resist change we don’t have a part in bringing about.

This explains why the engagement of stakeholders in shaping the new transmission line design and route was likely to be effective.

So science validates common sense and a respectful approach to dealing with stakeholders. If government or private enterprise wishes to gain support for a new policy or project, they must move beyond seeing stakeholder engagement as a ‘compliance activity’ and genuinely involve people in ways that build trust and provide a sense of autonomy and influence.

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1 See Rock D (2008) SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1, 1–9.