

## Challenging our Power and Privilege

Too often, public engagement reinforces existing, damaging power imbalances. Meaningful dialogue means we need to consider our power and privilege and explore new ways to build relationships. Over the past 18 months, the public engagement teams at Wellcome Connecting Science and Queen Mary, University of London have been testing new ways of understanding their individual and institutional power and collaborating equitably with communities.

In being connected to collaborate on the Engage Unconference, Sarah Gifford (QMUL) and Damian Hebron (WCS) discussed the ways they had faced similar challenges and overlapping concerns - as well as points of difference in the work they had been doing in their organisations. Together they organised two open discussion events where they shared their experiences with public engagement professionals as part of the Engage Unconference.

About 35 people attended the discussions and many have subsequently connected with Damian and Sarah to share insight and discuss further the methods we can all utilise to break down the power structures that surround our institutions.

A number of common themes emerged:

- **Authenticity:** this work requires a commitment across teams and it needs people to bring their 'whole selves' to it in order to be successful. This can feel risky or uncomfortable and also requires us as individuals to remove some of the armour we have acquired to protect our 'work persona'
- **Time:** this work takes time to deliver, to nurture relationships and build trust. Sometimes, this need to take time, can sit at odds with the demands of our institutions for tangible outputs, this requires careful expectation management.
- **Advocacy:** this work requires institutional allies and champions at a senior level. Building this support requires careful and constant internal advocacy as well as external relationship building.
- **Community:** this work is a collaboration with communities which have previously been marginalised. To do this successfully we need to think carefully about communities (of place and of interest) and do our best to meet them where they are - rather than bring them to us.
- **Reach:** this work requires effort and thought to extend our approach beyond those communities we already have relationships with. This means constantly asking hard questions about whose voices are not being heard and striving to listen to them.

As part of the Conference, we will be sharing some of these insights in the form of a workshop for participants. This will take the form of a series of questions which participants will work through to consider: their motivation and drive to generate change; the potential allies they can work with, as well as barriers to overcome; ways they can make their change actionable and accountable; and how to create a constructive and brave space in which to tackle the individual and institutional discomfort that goes with challenging our own power and privilege.

The session will take place on Thursday 2nd December at 9.15.