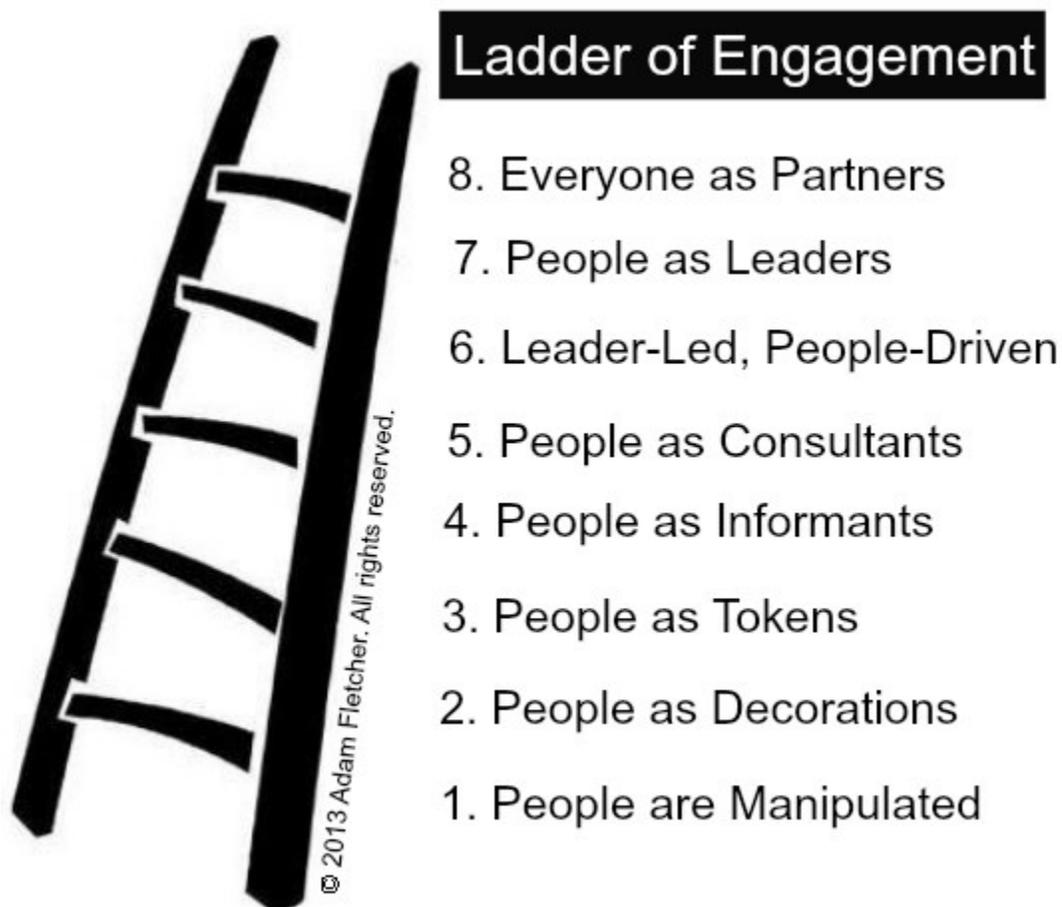


# THE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT

By Adam Fletcher

The Ladder of Engagement introduces the depths and heights of any practice seeking to engage leaders. It can be used in decision-making, planning, teaching, evaluating, advocating, and all activities throughout our communities, including work, education, community building. There is no single point in the process when it's inappropriate or ineffective to use this tool.



The trickiest part of the Ladder of Engagement is that it presents these different positions as if they were sequential. They are not. Instead, the different positions should represent a non-linear series of different realities facing leaders. There is no step-by-step progression, as some activities start with manipulation while others start with equitable partnerships.

## FULLY ENGAGING ACTIVITIES

### Rung 8

When people experience **everyone as partners**, the activity they're involved in can be fully engaging. It can a 40/60 split, or 20/80 split of power when it's deemed appropriate by everyone involved. Everyone involved—including leaders and the people—are recognized for their impact in the activity, and each has ownership of the outcomes. Partnerships require conscious commitment by everyone to overcome the barriers involved.

Rung 8 positions everyone in healthy, whole relationships with each other while moving forward in action. This can ultimately create structures that support differences by establishing safe, supportive environments for everyone. In turn, this may lead to recreating the climate and culture of our communities, and lead to the greatest efficacy of engagement.

### Rung 7

Activities that engage **people as leaders** move leaders from positions of authority towards supportive roles for people, allowing them only passive or *very* behind-the-scenes roles. This gives people the platform to take action in situations where leaders are apathetic or when people are not seen with regard for their contributions, only for their deficits. Developing complete ownership of their actions can allow people to drive their developmental, cultural, social, and educational experiences with a lot of effectiveness, and they can experience the potential of their direct actions upon themselves, their peers, and their larger communities.

Unfortunately, people-led activities can accidentally operate in a vacuum where the impact of their actions on the larger community isn't recognized by the community's systems or its leaders. Activities driven by people may not be seen with the validity of activities co-led with leaders, either.

### Rung 6

Experiencing **leader-led, people-driven** activities can engage people. This is a 50/50 split of authority, obligation, and commitment. This approach can allow people to experience full power and authority in relationship to leaders. This rung can foster deeper connections.

One of the challenges of leader-led, people-driven activities is that there isn't recognition for the specific developmental needs or representation opportunities for people. 50/50 splits of authority assume that everyone generally has the same abilities, when oftentimes they don't. Practically speaking, people might get bored and become quickly disengaged without receiving that acknowledgment of their needs.

## FULLY DISENGAGING ACTIVITIES

### Rung 3

As soon as leaders determine which people should be engaged, they may begin **tokenizing** people. This means funneling, narrowing, focusing, or otherwise trimming the breadth, depth, or purpose of people. These activities do not genuinely reflect the attitudes, opinions, ideas, actions, knowledge, or beliefs of people. Tokenism can happen anytime leaders seek to engage people in a specific issue or particular way, and happens frequently.

Tokenism happens because leaders expect individual people to represent themselves and all people on specific issues that leaders want to hear about. It displaces the actual opinions, wisdom, ideas, and knowledge people have about the world they live in and replaces them with conveniently chosen, leader-guided thinking. It does not respect people for who they actually are, instead insisting that people only need to be engaged when leaders want them to be.

### Rung 2

Another way leaders misuse people happens when they are used as **decoration** for leaders' ideas. Leaders make choices and then use people to shore up their choices. Posing people around leaders as a leader speaks; having people rally for leaders' ideas; or putting people in suits to share their thoughts in front of their peers are some of the ways that leaders use people as decorations.

This is misuse because it invalidates anything substantive people might present. Instead, it only allows them to be props for leaders' beliefs, reinforcing the old idea that "Some people just don't know what's best for them." Old thinking, this couldn't be more false today. People have the ability to make their authentic voices known in dozens of ways all of the time, yet they are still frequently treated as if they don't. This disconnection doesn't serve anyone, and is severely damaging our communities.

## Rung 1

The last way leaders try to engage people is through **manipulation**, where they try to force people to become involved. Faced with losing something like money or the acceptance of leaders, people are sometimes forced to pretend to be engaged. That pinching of people's genuine interests to ensure they are engaged is insidious, even if it is well-meaning. Making sure that people fit leaders' expectations for them shows that the real ways they reveal their thoughts, beliefs, ideals, and wisdom aren't the "right" ways leaders want to hear them, or that what they're sharing isn't the "right" thing. This can encourage people to change their minds in order to fit the molds presented in order to make the grade or be accepted.

Manipulation is wrong because it shows people that engagement shouldn't happen without reward or punishment. It demeans basic humanity by robbing people of their innate opinions, inherent knowledge, powerful actions, and secure wisdom. Instead, it positions them as consumers of communities, while perversely proving people are incapable or undesiring of having their voices heard. If leaders believe they have the responsibility of fostering democracy in our society, manipulating people actively undermines that responsibility while taking away the rights of people.

Addressing the *Ladder of Engagement* allows us to see the power, possibilities, and hope of our everyday interactions with people we serve. How are you going to use it today?

## Resources

There are many, many resources for working to engage communities. I have written many articles and publications about the topic. For more information, visit <http://adamfletcher.net>.