ACE NZ // AUGUST 2025

Engagement principles for consultants and clients

Discussion document and workshop summary

Purpose

This discussion paper has been commissioned by ACE New Zealand[1] and has been written for representatives of engineering consulting firms and their clients.

The paper includes a set of draft principles that aim to guide and enhance client and consultant engagement practices and behaviours. The principles are informed by findings from a co-design workshop hosted by ACE on 16 May 2025.

Context

The lifecycle of client investment in construction and infrastructure projects is complex. How a project is defined, set up and procured from the outset has significant implications downstream for project outcomes, including the cultural, economic, social and environmental outcomes for New Zealand. How we plan, procure and deliver projects can also generate efficiencies, reduce cost, and enhance productivity and innovation. Strong systems, processes and relationships between consultants and clients sit at the heart of achieving these outcomes.

ACE is embarking on a campaign to drive better consultant and client relationships and engagement practices to improve collaboration, efficiencies and the management of risks, with the goal of improving productivity, time and cost efficiency, outcomes and positive impacts on the economy, society and the environment. The campaign has two parts:

1. Leading a national conversation on what good engagement looks like and why it is critical, underpinned by six principles of good engagement
2. Developing guidance to help influence the systems, processes and behaviours for good engagement throughout the project lifecycle, aligned to the six principles of good engagement

This campaign is informed by local and international evidence about how to build an ethical, sustainable and high performing construction and infrastructure sector. The Construction Sector Accord,[2] undertaken in recent years in New Zealand, and Consult Australia's 'Model Client' campaign,[3] are two significant examples that will inform the campaign.

This work is located in Aotearoa New Zealand where Te Tiriti o Waitangi establishes the relationships, rights, responsibilities and obligations that people have to live ethically on lands where Māori are tangata whenua and indigenous rights holders. ACE is committed to ensuring Te Tiriti o Waitangi underpins this campaign.

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[1] ACE New Zealand is the champion for consulting and engineering in Aotearoa and represents more than 270 consulting firms ranging from sole traders to large global firms. ACE NZ provides its members with tools, advice, advocacy and leadership.

[2] The Construction Sector Accord was signed in April 2019 by Government and industry leaders as part of the Industry Transformation Plan. It set out a shared vision, priorities for change and goals to work together for a high performing building and construction sector. Work on the Accord has now ceased.

[3] See: Consult Australia, Model Client: aca-ca-model-client_final.pdf

How to read this paper

This paper has two sections:

Section one — key principles

This section comprises a set of six draft principles to guide good client-consultant engagement practices and behaviours.

These principles have been distilled from an analysis of data gathered from a co-design client-consultant workshop hosted by ACE and facilitated by FrankAdvice on 16 May 2025.

Section two — workshop findings

This section includes summarised findings from the ACE co-design workshop.

The workshop was designed to gather information about what good client-consultant engagement looks like and what gets in the way of good client-consultant engagement. Participants then identified 'principle areas' which form the basis of the draft principles in section one.

Tell us what you think

These draft principles provide a starting point for discussion. It is important that they are meaningful and appropriate and have the potential for practical applicability.

We invite you to join the kōrero and share your feedback on these draft principles by completing a short survey at www.acenz.org.nz/principles.

Next steps

Once we've shared these draft principles and considered feedback, we'll publish a final version. ACE will use these principles to support our advocacy work around better procurement, contracting, partnerships and driving better engagement between consultants and clients.

The second step of this campaign will be to identify and develop key supports, creating a library of tools and resources to support adoption of these behaviours.

Key principles

The following six principles aim to guide and enhance client-consultant relationships and engagement practices.

The principles have been developed from the themes that came out of a co-design workshop, which involved consultants and clients from a cross-section of sectors. See section two for a summary of the workshop findings, and examples of how the principles can be applied in practice.

PRINCIPLE ONE
Engage relationally with integrity and respect

Explanation

Successful client-consultant engagement happens when there is an appreciation and respect for each party's context, constraints, business drivers and expertise. When consultants and clients take a "human-centred" and fair approach by listening to each other and acting with integrity, respect, care, honesty and humility, this contributes to building trusted partnerships rather than transactional relationships. This foundation of trust leads to enhanced engagement, which contributes to better project outcomes.

Barriers

Barriers that get in the way of clients and consultants understanding each other and acting in positive relational ways are varied and include:

- Inflexible application of, or poorly understood, procurement rules
- Fiscal constraints
- Time pressures
- Third party expectations or influences
- A lack of commercial confidence between parties
- A lack of clear governance structures
- Leadership capacity and capability gaps

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like recruiting for, resourcing and rewarding client and consultant behaviours that are authentic, purpose-driven, transparent and kind.

Creating the conditions for these behaviours is important and can include:

- Co-locating consultants and clients together for projects
- Careful consideration of the right procurement approach to take for the project and seeking market feedback
- Funding relational skills training
- Appointing industry liaisons to support multi-directional information flows, particularly for the early resolution of emerging issues
- Investing the time required to understand each other's contexts, influencers and constraints during market sounding and before procurement rules are set, as well as after the contract is agreed and throughout the project

PRINCIPLE TWO
Clarify purpose and outcomes

Explanation

Having a shared vision, a well-defined purpose and scope, and clear outcomes for commissioned work can be a catalyst for bringing stakeholders together and an enabler of enhanced engagement practices between clients and consultants.

Barriers

Key factors that can distract clients and consultants from collectively working in purpose driven ways to achieve project outcomes are:

- Knowledge gaps in understanding what is required to deliver projects
- Unclear roles and responsibilities
- Changes in business drivers and scope
- Third-party influences affecting scope clarity

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like:

- Client-led processes that collectively define and communicate the vision, purpose and desired outcomes of a project, including clarity around what may be given up or changed in order to deliver on the desired outcomes
- Promoting a narrative that focuses on the outcomes and value of the project rather than just cost
- Planning and resourcing collective visioning and storytelling workshops with stakeholders early in the project cycle and keeping that storytelling alive throughout the project
- Developing kawenata (charters) that articulate ways of working, roles and responsibilities, and accountability settings at the initiation of a project.

PRINCIPLE THREE
Ensure strong governance, leadership and decision-making

Explanation

Clear and well understood governance, leadership and decision-making processes enable clients and consultants to engage well together and make decisions effectively, increasing productivity and efficiency.

Barriers

Uncertainty and mistrust in client-consultant relationships can arise from:

- Siloed approaches to problem solving
- An absence of clear decision-making processes
- Lack of project leadership and ownership regarding:

    o   Project scope
    o   Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities
    o   Leadership turnover
    o   Capability and capacity limitations of leaders.

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like:

- Adopting accountability frameworks and explicitly defining roles and who is responsible for which decisions and outcomes, with documented escalation paths for resolving disputes
- Maintaining decision-making registers for tracking decisions and learning from them
- Developing knowledge transfer protocols
- Dedicating time for leadership development and succession planning to mitigate the impact of leadership turnover

PRINCIPLE FOUR
Balance risk while creating the conditions for innovation

Explanation

Innovation by its nature introduces risk. Striving to manage risks while fostering innovative mindsets is an important lever and enabler of positive client-consultant engagement practices.

Barriers

Innovation and adding value can be limited by:

- Unrealistic risk allocation and fear-based decision-making
- Over reliance on legal perspectives instead of outcomes
- Complex procurement rules and procedures
- Strict adherence to rigid processes

These factors can also lead to frustrations in relationships between clients and consultants who are motivated by different business drivers and constraints.

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like:

- Conducting proactive analysis to identify potential failure points and develop mitigation strategies and decision pathways before problems occur
- Adopting transparent and values-based risk assessment and allocation practices
- Implementing outcomes-based procurement and quality-based selection processes
- Being clear on what may be given up or changed if the innovation doesn't work
- Establishing process evaluation reviews to assess if processes are enabling or hindering innovation and project success
- Cultivating diverse thinking and innovation
- Resourcing and empowering courageous leadership and courageous decision-making frameworks
- Recruiting for and rewarding diversity of perspectives
- Adopting flexible delivery models and creating contractual frameworks that can adapt to emerging requirements and opportunities

PRINCIPLE FIVE
Expect change and plan for it

Explanation

Changes that disrupt projects and challenge client-consultant relationships, are inevitable and must be planned for. Some changes can't be predicted or controlled such as extreme weather events or unexpected changes in political agendas. Other changes, such as shifting project drivers or scope changes, should be expected and managed predictably. Changes in people on a project should also be expected and planned for, and on large projects encouraged. Innovation may also introduce unforeseen changes to a project and should be expected.

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like:

- Evaluating potential impacts of changes to timelines, budgets, and outcomes before implementation and creating proactive mitigation and decision-making strategies for if the impact arises
- Having processes for approving, documenting and communicating project changes
- Undertaking proactive analysis and using learnings from past projects to help predict disruptions and develop strategies to mitigate
- Identifying potential external influences and developing strategies to manage them effectively
- Creating systems to maintain project continuity during leadership changes
- Adopting agile change principles that ensure changes are communicated clearly, honestly and proactively

PRINCIPLE SIX
Communicate transparently

Explanation

Honest, timely and transparent communication and early, intentional and continuous engagement is integral to successful client-consultant relationships and is a key ingredient for sustainable, trust-based practices.

Barriers

Barriers to enabling transparent information flows and sustained engagement can include:

- Inflexible application of, or poorly understood, procurement rules
- Insufficient information sharing and engagement during procurement stages
- A lack of transparency about project costs and expectations
- Gaps in information required to make informed decisions about costs, scope and timing.

Bringing this principle to life

Enacting this principle could look like:

- Establishing early, intentional and continuous engagement practices
- Assessing the risks and benefits of information sharing
- Practising financial transparency and sharing information openly by default (with exceptions for legally sensitive matters)
- Creating opportunities for mutual learning about each other's business models (for example, business reality education), constraints, and processes to improve information flows and relationships
- Establishing common language protocols and communication guidelines to bridge industry-specific terminology differences
- Clearly identifying what information is needed by whom and when throughout the project lifecycle and identifying who is accountable and/or responsible for overseeing information flows
- Establishing clear expectations for information flows at project initiation

Workshop findings

In April 2025, ACE commissioned FrankAdvice to design and facilitate a co-design workshop with representatives from ACE member consulting firms, and representatives from the clients of ACE member consulting firms.

The co-design workshop took place on 16 May in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. The purpose of the workshop was to identify what "good" engagement and behaviours of consultants and clients look like and to help generate a set of principles to guide better client and consultant engagement.

Twelve participants attended the workshop – seven from consultancies of various sizes, geographies and sectors, and five from central and local government agencies (representing clients). Participants included Māori perspectives and practitioners who have worked across different jurisdictions.

Through a series of facilitated interactive activities that role modelled relational practices, participants drew on their own experiences and worked together to identify:

- What good client-consultant engagement looks like
- What gets in the way of good client-consultant engagement
- What principles might guide enhanced client-consultant engagement and good behaviours

The data collected at this workshop has been summarised below.

Part one

What does good client-consultant engagement look like?

The first block of the workshop focused on what "good" client-consultant engagement looks like. Engaging in a "listening triads" activity, participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences of when things went well in a client-consultant project. They were asked to focus on the behaviours they observed during that time that led to good engagement.

Participants took turns to share their stories while their colleagues practiced "listening to understand" and "key message" note taking skills. Participants then looked for commonalities in their stories and prioritised what they saw as the most important "good behaviours" and shared these with the wider group.

The key themes that emerged from the collaborative discussion are summarised below and capture what participants said constitutes good client-consultant engagement. Many of these themes overlap. Where possible, the participants' own words have been used to illustrate each theme.

Good engagement is built on a foundation of trust

Trust was a consistent and overarching theme throughout the workshop and was identified as a key ingredient for enhanced client-consultant engagement. Participants identified that building trust between clients and consultants requires time, effort, honesty, openness and vulnerability.

For example:

- **Being honest about challenges and being upfront**
  "Putting our hands up and being humble when things go wrong"
  "Being honest on deadlines"

- **Assuming positive intent and seeing vulnerability as a strength**
  "Everyone is here to do their best"
  "The more we lead with vulnerability, the more others are likely to, which builds trust"

- **Creating an open culture that welcomes brave conversations**
  "Having a 'no blame' culture"
  "Welcoming brave conversations"

Good engagement requires open and honest communication

Clear, timely, and honest communication was seen as the backbone of successful client-consultant engagement. Participants identified values-based and relational behaviours as well as practical ideas for encouraging open and direct communication and transparency of information sharing between clients and consultants.

For example:

- **Ensuring transparent information flows and multi-directional dialogue**
  "Good, honest and transparent information flows up and down"
  "Transparency of clients' budgets"

- **Setting up regular 'touch points'**
  "Having weekly meetings and co-locating"
  "Having a role for 'industry liaisons' who listen to the market and show industry is being listened to"

- Encouraging respectful candid conversations
  "Welcoming brave conversations and radical candour"
  "Calling out poor behaviour early and quickly. Being clear about needs. Putting everything on the table to build joint understanding"

Good engagement is enhanced when there is mutual understanding and respect

Participants agreed that successful engagement happens when there is a deep appreciation for each party's context, constraints and expertise.

For example:

- Appreciating each other's expertise and intentions and recognising contributions
  "Respecting expertise and being receptive to expertise"
  "Stopping the mindset of clients that suppliers are here to rip us off"
  "Acknowledging the value that each person brings"

- Understanding business realities and drivers, and seeing the bigger picture
  "Clients need to understand the consultant's business model and consultants need to understand the client's context and pressures"
  "Understanding what the client is trying to do and why"

Good engagement fosters collaboration and co-creation

Participants identified that **working** together as a unified team rather than as separate entities produces the best type of engagement and leads to better outcomes.

For example:

- Enabling physical proximity and human connection
  "Co-locating and working together face to face is really important… when we are all in a room together, we realise we are all human beings"

- Having a unified approach, a partnership mindset, and shared responsibility
  "Things would be better if all our relationships were like a partnership instead of transactional relationships"
  "A one team approach"

- Enabling inclusive and consensus problem-solving
  "In Te Ao Māori, one person never makes a decision alone"

Good engagement is supported by strong leadership and governance

Participants shared that having effective leadership and governance from the client helps to create the conditions for successful consulting engagements. This finding highlights the power dynamic in the client-consultant relationship with a focus on clients needing to show leadership as the ones commissioning the work.

For example:

- Clients acting as champions for change and leading by example
  "We need client leadership and support from the top"
  "Clients need to set the tone and walk the talk"
  "Client front footed challenges to promote collaborative working"

- Strong leaders being open to change and removing obstacles
  "Client recognition that something needs to change and acting on it"

Good engagement happens when values, expectations and accountabilities are clearly defined at the start

Participants identified that setting explicit shared values and expectations from the start helps to establish a solid foundation for the client-consultant working relationship.

For example:

- Understanding and agreeing on a vision and having a well-defined scope
  "Ensuring a collective and shared vision"
  "A good scope from day one"

- Establishing an engagement model; setting standards and an accountability framework
  "Having a kawenata (charter) helps to establish connections with each other"
  "Holding each other to account for outcomes"
  "Creating a structure to resolve issues"
  "Development of an engagement model"

- Sharing risks and rewards
  "Contractually, shared pain/gain allows team to crack through issues more readily"

Good engagement requires the ability to be flexible and open to change

Being adaptable and having a willingness to evolve things as circumstances change was identified as essential for good engagement (and for project success).

For example:

- Openness to adaptation and orienting to learning
  "Being open to sharing lessons – not holding on to them"

- Taking a collaborative solution-oriented approach
  "Solve issues smartly not litigiously"

- Fostering continuous improvement and integrating feedback
  "Being open to feedback and change"
  "Having regular check-ins for feedback"

Good engagement is enhanced when there is a focus on people and shared outcomes

Maintaining clear sight of human factors and desired results was said to lead to better overall engagement between clients and consultants. It should be noted that the focus on people extended beyond clients and consultants to include the 'end-users', suppliers, iwi and contractors.

For example:

- Taking a 'human-centred' and fair approach
  "Caring for people and outcomes"
  "Be hard on the issues, fair on the people"
  "Passion and care for the outcome overrode the blame"

- Celebrating collective success
"Mutual care for each other and buying in to everyone's success"
"We have lost a sense of fun. We need to encourage that"

- Orienting to outcomes
"Meeting shared expectations"

Good engagement requires early, intentional and continuous engagement

Many of the groups identified that starting collaboration early and maintaining it throughout the lifecycle of the project is an important requirement for enhancing engagement and delivering results. This focus on having various actors involved earlier in processes to avoid problems further down the line was a consistent theme throughout the workshop.

For example:

- Starting engagement earlier
"Having consultants help with the business case"
"Clients bringing in suppliers early"
"Iwi involved in design development and tender evaluation"

- Having pipeline visibility
"Transparency of pipeline… engage before buying"

- Pre-emptive planning
"Workshop with client upfront"

- Early issue resolution
"Address issues early"
"Avoid the drift"
"Don't let issues go for too long"

Good engagement is supported by the recognition of value beyond price

A common theme in participants' stories was a desire to improve client understanding that quality and value extend beyond the lowest bid and this creates better long-term outcomes.

- Value-based selection
"Value-based selection not money – the cheapest price is not always the best way"

- Taking a long-term perspective
"It would be good if we could think in longer-term strategic goals rather than projects"

- Establishing strategic alignment
"Then we would be working to the same aligned interests"

PART TWO

What gets in the way of good client-consultant engagement?

Having identified what good client-consultant engagement looks like, the second block of the workshop focused on what gets in the way of good engagement. Participants engaged in a series of activities to identify the key barriers and challenges that get in the way of good engagement at each major phase of the project cycle. The purpose of these activities was to improve the shared understanding of the challenges before laying the foundations for principles to drive better behaviours throughout the project life cycle.

Participants gathered at stations set up around the room that represented three phases: pre-procurement, procurement, and design and delivery. They then discussed and noted at each of the project cycle stations: What are the common barriers or challenges we face? Who is most impacted, the client, consultant or someone else? What are the most likely causes of this barrier or challenge? How serious is the barrier (low/medium/high impact)? Participants then voted on which barriers they thought were the most important.

A summary of the most important challenges identified by participants is documented below. There is some overlap between the clusters of barriers. Participants' own words have been used to illustrate each cluster of barriers where appropriate.

Weak governance and leadership are barriers to good engagement

- Poor governance structures and misaligned messaging
- Leadership turnover causing lack of continuity
- Capability and capacity limitations of client leaders
- Disconnect between decision-makers and lack of certainty, trust and accountability
- Lack of project leadership and ownership regarding project scope

Not having a shared vision, purpose and objectives is a barrier to good engagement

- Lack of shared vision and alignment of objectives. Lack of clear mandate and project purpose. Need to set these early so they can cascade down.
- Need for consultants and clients to understand the needs of end-users and clarify the "why" of a project

Risk aversion is a limitation to good engagement

- Excessive caution limiting innovative approaches
- Fear-based decision-making and lack of courage to make difficult decisions
- Trust issues with internal stakeholders (for example, peer reviewers) and external parties
- Unrealistic risk allocation in contracts
- Over reliance on legal perspectives instead of outcomes

Having an unclear scope definition is a barrier to good engagement

- Lack of clear scope and gaps in understanding of the work required to deliver outcomes. Non-realistic understanding of what needs to be done.
- Changes in drivers, scope changes and definitional challenges not managed
- Consent conditions and third-party influences affecting scope clarity

Budget, capacity and resource limitations get in the way of good engagement

- Unfair tendering processes and budget expectations
- Capability and capacity limitations to develop clear mandates

- Insufficient resources for proper project execution
- Unknown pipeline of work for consultants means fragility in financing leading to strained relationships

Change management and change processes that are not managed well create challenges to good engagement

- Poor handling of project changes
- Interference of third parties (for example, political agendas or government changes)
- Shifting project drivers and inadequate processes for managing scope changes
- Lack of continuity when leadership changes

A lack of fresh perspectives and rigid rule following can stymie innovation and good engagement

- Complex procurement rules restrict access for smaller consultancies
- Resistance to innovative approaches
- Complicated procedures hindering effective delivery
- Restricted thinking due to adherence to conventional methods/over-reliance on established processes
- Unclear information and a lack of transparency of information flows can be a barrier to good engagement
- Insufficient information sharing during procurement
- Lack of transparency about project costs and expectations
- Gaps in information required to make informed decisions
- Lack of commercial confidence between parties

Disconnected decision-making and processes creates barriers to good engagement

- Unclear decision-making processes across all levels
- Disconnect between technical knowledge and management requirements
- Siloed approaches to problem-solving
- Fragmented responsibilities for outcomes

PART THREE

Principles for effective client-consultant engagement

In the third and final block of the workshop, participants were guided to bring together their learning about what good looks like and what gets in the way of good to generate a draft set of principles for good engagement.

The goal of this set of activities was to co-design actionable, meaningful principles in response to the barriers in client-consultant engagements (identified in section two, part two), with the idea that these principles would help enable good behaviours (identified in section two, part one).

While participants did not have the time in the workshop to fully develop a set of principles, they did generate a number of practical ideas and "principle areas" that generated data to analyse and distil into the set of draft principles in section one. The principle areas identified in the workshop are summarised below. There is some overlap between the principle areas. Anonymised quotes have been used to illustrate the points raised.

Governance and leadership

> *"Enable and empower people to make the right decisions at the right time."*

This principle area aims to strengthen governance and leadership structures and capabilities and responds to the need for more clarity with regard to roles, responsibilities, accountabilities and decision-making processes.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Adopting clear accountability frameworks – explicitly defining who is responsible for which decisions and outcomes, with documented escalation paths for resolving disputes
- Creating decision-making continuity plans – developing knowledge transfer protocols and succession planning to mitigate the impact of leadership turnover
- Cultivating courageous leadership – fostering an environment where leaders are resourced and empowered to make difficult decisions with appropriate risk assessment rather than defaulting to risk avoidance

Shared vision and objectives

> *"The client takes ownership of collectively defining, communicating and bringing to life a shared vision and objectives."*

This principle area aims to unify clients and consultants and bridge knowledge and communication gaps. This includes ensuring there is shared understanding of the project's vision and objectives and that effort is consistently made to clarify the purpose and deliverables for everyone involved in the project.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Establishing a co-designed kawenata or charter at project initiation to document the vision and purpose of the project as well as agreed client-consultant values, standards, engagement practices, decision-making pathways and accountabilities
- Co-creating project vision documents – collaboratively developing vision and "why statements" that drive the work, capturing technical requirements and human-centred outcomes
- Implementing role clarity sessions – conducting structured workshops to clearly define the roles, responsibilities and value contribution of clients, consultants and other stakeholders
- Creating opportunities to learn and "listen to understand" – creating opportunities for consultants and clients to directly experience end-user environments and perspectives before proposing solutions

- Establishing common language protocols – developing glossaries and communication guidelines to bridge industry-specific terminology differences

Risk management

"Create a culture where clients and consultants collectively commit to understanding and proactively managing risks."

This principle area aims to move clients and consultants beyond fear-based decision-making to balance risk approaches.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Adopting value-based risk assessment – evaluating risks not only by likelihood and impact but also by potential value creation or preservation
- Practicing transparent risk allocation – assigning risks to the party best positioned to manage them rather than pushing all risks to one party
- Implementing courageous decision frameworks – creating structured approaches for making difficult decisions that balance risk management with opportunity capture and reframing changes as opportunities not threats
- Encouraging and rewarding efforts to create psychological safety – fostering "no blame" environments where team members can raise concerns without fear of repercussion
- Conducting pre-mortem analyses – in partnership, proactively identifying potential failure points and developing mitigation strategies before problems occur

Scope definition

"Know your story and keep it central and consistent."

This principle area focused on clarifying the "story" of the project ensuring all the voices important to the project are listened to and are included in the broader "project story".

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Implementing purpose-first scoping – focussing on active listening to understand and beginning all scope discussions with clear articulation of the "why" before discussing the "what" and "how"
- Developing living scope documents – creating adaptable scope documentation that can evolve with the project while maintaining clear change control processes
- Practicing scope visualisation – developing the project narrative collaboratively and using visual tools and storytelling techniques (such as the methodology of purakau) to ensure shared understanding of scope across diverse stakeholders
- Establishing scope validation protocols – regularly checking that the scope remains aligned with project purpose and stakeholder needs through structured reviews

Budget and resource planning

"Understand the actual work to be done versus work that is imagined."

This principle area aims to create transparent understanding of financial realities.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Practicing financial transparency – sharing realistic budget constraints and business model realities early in the engagement process

- Implementing business reality education – creating mutual understanding through open discussion of financial constraints and business models on both client and consultant sides and connecting resource discussions to project outcomes
- Adopting value-based selection – evaluating proposals based on value creation potential rather than the lowest price
- Establishing resource forecasting protocols – developing shared visibility into upcoming resource needs and availability to support better planning
- Creating capability building partnerships – identifying opportunities where consultants can help build client capability as part of the engagement

Change management

"Expect change and plan for it with transparency."

This principle area aims to develop more structured approaches to inevitable changes.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Developing change impact assessment frameworks – systematically evaluating potential impacts of changes on timeline, budget, and outcomes before implementation
- Establishing change authorisation protocols – creating clear processes for evaluating, approving, documenting and communicating project changes
- Undertaking political environment mapping – proactively identifying potential external influences and developing strategies to manage them effectively
- Implementing leadership transition protocols – creating systems to maintain project continuity during leadership changes
- Adopting agile change principles and ensuring changes are communicated clearly, honestly and proactively – incorporating structured flexibility into project planning to accommodate necessary changes while maintaining momentum

Innovation

"Create conditions that welcome fresh perspectives and challenge the status quo."

This principle area aims to help clients and consultants break free from rigid thinking and processes.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Implementing outcomes-based procurement – focussing procurement requirements on desired outcomes rather than prescriptive methods
- Establishing process evaluation reviews – regularly assessing whether existing processes are enabling or hindering project success
- Cultivating diverse thinking and innovation teams, processes and cultures – dedicating time for idea generation and exploration and intentionally including team members with varied backgrounds and perspectives to constructively challenge conventional approaches
- Adopting flexible delivery models – creating contractual frameworks that can adapt to emerging requirements and opportunities

Transparent communication

"Be fully transparent unless there is a valid reason not to be."

This principle area aims to build trust through more open and transparent information sharing.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Practicing radical transparency – assessing the risks and benefits of information sharing, and sharing information openly by default, with exceptions only for legally sensitive matters
- Establishing information requirement protocols and transparency plans – clearly identifying what information is needed by whom and when throughout the project lifecycle at the initiation of the project and establishing clear expectations for information flows
- Implementing joint education sessions – creating opportunities for mutual learning about each other's business models, constraints and processes
- Developing communication cadences and channels – establishing regular rhythms for information sharing at different organisational and government levels using different channels suited to different audiences
- Connecting communications to the project objectives and fostering psychological safety for "bad news" – reinforcing the objectives of the project at all times and actively encouraging and rewarding early sharing of problems and concerns

Decision-making

"Create transparent, open decision-making with clear accountability."

This principle area aims to create integrated approaches to decision-making.

Enacting this principle in practice might look like:

- Designing, documenting and implementing clear and transparent decision-making frameworks (for example, RACI) – ensuring they include defined roles and responsibilities and connect with, and match the authority of, governance and accountability frameworks
- Maintaining a decision-making register for tracking decisions and learning from them

Thanks and next steps

We wish to extend our thanks to the participants of the ACE co-design workshop. Participants were engaged, honest and committed to enhancing client-consultant engagement practices.

This paper will be shared with representatives from consulting firms and clients for their feedback. This feedback will help refine the principles to ensure they are meaningful, appropriate and useful.

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