THE POWER OF
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Preventing project opposition requires a cultural component in the decision-making process

With traditional project planning, there appears to be little problem identifying potential roadblocks that can lead to costly delays. However, it is often the community's opposition to a project that causes the most significant challenges. All too often, the local community first learns about a project after decisions are made and the project is underway. Clearly, that's too late.

In launching a new project, working with the local community beforehand has become critical to its success. As one executive told me, "Once people understand how the project will benefit them, they will typically support it."

But rather than start with understanding the project benefits, the company starts with its traditional design and route planning, with little consideration to how the project may impact the social and cultural aspects that exist within the community. Since every community operates within its own cultural boundary, anything that intrudes on it has the potential to ignite a negative reaction. And this only serves to delay the project, sometimes halting it altogether. People want to be able to predict, participate in and control their environment in a manner that maintains or improves their well-being. That means companies must rethink how they operate if they want to avoid potential opposition.

Reality Check

A project will either be welcomed by the community or be fought by it. If the disruption caused by project opposition can be taken off the table, the company will gain an enormous financial and time advantage. But this requires that the social and cultural component be addressed early on in the planning phase. Otherwise, the company can only react when trouble surfaces.

When the citizens impacted by a new project are taken by surprise, they are likely to react. Before long, there's opposition to the project, leaving the company with little recourse other than to defend it. The response is to invest more resources at the problem, launching public relations campaigns and organizing formal meetings. But this one-way communication only serves to intensify the conflict. Once a company is perceived as the villain, more and more citizens join in the effort to oppose the project. If only those impacted by the project had been considered beforehand.

The social and cultural environment of a project's location now requires the greatest attention. To prevent complexity from occurring, it is essential to understand the political, cultural and social world within which projects eventually have to function. And this requires the project team to become knowledgeable about the people where the project is located.

A New Concept Emerges

Understanding the dynamics within the impacted community is no easy task. To implement will require a new team to be integrated into the project planning methodology: The Community Engagement Team.

The Community Engagement Team would be responsible for becoming fully immersed in the local community, with the goal of understanding their local networks, engaging in a two-way dialogue about the project and learning about the issues and concerns that currently exist.

The challenge is to look beyond the project's timeline and budget—to see the project from the community's point of view. But this necessitates a two-way dialogue based on engaging, learning and listening. It requires companies to work collaboratively with citizens before the final decisions are set in stone, and

this can only happen with face-to-face interactions. People need to know that their issues are being heard. By demonstrating that the company understands those concerns, trust can begin to develop. And once people no longer feel threatened, they have the space to view the new project as a potential benefit rather than an intrusion.

Right of way professionals should form the bulk of this new team. They are the ones that have early involvement with the landowners. From their community vantage point, they will know who to talk to, timing and sequence concerns and the kind of language to use in media handouts. They can also provide valuable input into the public relations strategy to ensure it aligns with the local culture. Armed with all this knowledge, the team can ensure that the issues and concerns are addressed before project implementation. The project can then be absorbed into the fabric of the community without causing disruption.

Hindsight is 20/20

Many projects that have become controversial would have benefited from this new model. In a recent pipeline case, when formal opposition surfaced, the local farmers who could have grounded the issue geographically were not contacted to have a voice in the project. Outside ideological groups gained control, and without the support of the local farmers, all the company could do to address the issue was to hire lawyers, lobbyists and special interest consultants and to conduct massive advertisement campaigns to persuade decision makers.

In situations where hostile reaction sets in, locals often shift their allegiance from understanding the potential benefits of the project to supporting the vocal opposition. At that point, the project has become too complex to manage. Instead of simply investing in the communities of impact, millions of dollars are spent trying to manage the chaos.

A Community Engagement Team can facilitate a two-way dialogue and demonstrate that they understand the issues and concerns of those impacted by the project.

> ## People want to be able to predict, participate in and control their environment in a manner that maintains or improves their well-being.

In the pipeline project referenced, many local governments—which were initially in favor of the project—joined the opposition. After disruption set in, the company proceeded to spend millions of dollars trying to influence the political system at all levels. Those efforts proved to be fruitless. The issue eventually returned to a well-organized local network of farmers who had been opposing the pipeline project over worries about its impact on the ground water. That issue could have been taken off the table early had the company fully understood the water concerns of the informal network of farmers, local citizens and those who owned adjacent land that had a historical survival connection to it.

The Invisible Suddenly Appear

It is vital to recognize that these local informal networks are functioning 24/7 within the community. And while they are often invisible on a day-to-day basis, they are the first to appear when a catastrophe occurs. Think about the power of the self-organizing networkss that formed after the hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Citizens—through their own internal processes—organized immediate rescue operations. Human brigades were assembled to remove rubble in hopes of finding buried neighbors. Everyday citizens formed rescue teams to supply and distribute whatever resources they could get, and every life saved became a spontaneous celebration. Natural leaders emerged. They formed quickly because of word-of-mouth communications, knowledge of the local terrain and a shared mission to help neighbors and strangers in real-time situations.

Managing Social Risk

We believe that using the Community Engagement Team concept before a project is officially launched will result in dramatic benefits. Many projects, however are launched without input from the right of way professionals who are tasked with negotiating with local property owners. Without adequate time to develop trust and relationships, property owners are often caught by surprise when an agent shows up and they first learn about the new project. Practically overnight, disruption and backlash begin to surface.

Rather than spending time and money on public relations campaigns, those resources would be better served if they were used to build relationships and trust within the community impacted by the project. This requires more time being spent listening and responding, and less time on telling, promoting and acting like an authority. Once the self-organizing networks understand how they can participate in and benefit from the project, they can serve as a buffer to opposition groups that have their own agenda.

Integrating a Community Engagement Team to prevent costly complexity from occurring will be a new idea for many. However, the project environment today is difficult in almost every aspect of development. To remove the threat of the social impacts is a tremendous step toward creating stability and maintaining the sustainability of projects. But this requires action, and that means implementing a strategy for managing social risk into every phase of an infrastructure project. ✪

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