

Communication Links

and Team Building in ROW Projects

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s all of us face a future of increased project loads, diminished resources, and shortened time frames, we are becoming accustomed to doing more with less. As professionals, we have to become more efficient if we are to succeed. Being able to work together more effectively is a very important aspect of that increased efficiency. Teamwork is rapidly becoming the single most important survival skill in the right-of-way field.

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*"We Are All on the
Same Boat - Grab
an Oar"* presented
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While it is indisputably true that team building and communication are to a ROW project like food and water are to a garden, it is also true that neither shows up by accident. Gardens need to be carefully tended to maximize yield, and ROW projects need communication and teamwork to insure maximum efficiency.



Let me give you an example. I am sure all of us are good team players. Nowadays, admitting to being a bad team player is the same as admitting that you don't shower and change socks occasionally. Nobody wants to be in that category. But are we good team players?

Let's have a little test. Consider this. How many of us have ever thought (or worse yet, said out loud) anything like the following: "If only those _____ (fill in the blank) appraisers/engineers/lawyers/negotiators had provided us with decent values/designs/title reports/results this project would have been much more successful?" Don't worry, I won't ask for a show of hands, because I think we all have been guilty at one point or another

of such thoughts. In order to be true team builders, we have to change the mindset that generates such thoughts. If these types of comments cross your mind, they will cross your lips, and soon affect your attitude. A project needs to be thought of as a seamless fabric rather than a series of unrelated tasks.

You're probably asking yourself what qualifies me to talk about team building? Well, the short answer is that I have had 20 years of experience in building teams to work on a wide variety of ROW related projects. However the real truth is, in those 20 years, I have made about every mistake that can be made in team building and communication. In this article, I aim to tell you what I have learned from

those mistakes, and having been on both sides of the table—as an LPA (local public agency) director/customer, and as a consultant/provider—I can speak from both sides of the issue. That's kind of the same as being able to speak out of both sides of your mouth.

During that 20 years, I have worked on projects in which every participant was a one-man band. They were not aware of being part of any sort of team effort. Designers/engineers never spoke with appraisers; appraisers never talked with title researchers; and no one spoke with the negotiators or relocation agents. Now if you work in an agency or a situation where this is the norm, you probably see nothing wrong with this sort of thing. If

that is the case, you have my sympathy. It doesn't have to be that way!

I have worked on other projects where every bit of gathered information made its way throughout the entire team. Designers/engineers consulted with appraisers and negotiators to ask if small design changes would have major impacts on costs or property owner attitudes. Title researchers made sure that appraisers were given up to date information on deed and ownership changes. When problems were encountered, every team member not only knew about them, they were invited to discuss ways of dealing with the problems as well. These types of projects not only run more smoothly, but they are also much easier on the blood pressure when the inevitable problems arise.

Based on all that I have learned about what works and what doesn't, I have formulated, over the last 20 years, six rules for successful team building. Let's call them.

JIM'S FAVORITE SIX-PACK

1. Have a Clear Purpose and Well-Defined Expectations. Know what you want to accomplish, and make sure that all members of your team do too. That may seem simplistic.

But unless each member knows your goals and objectives, and exactly what will be expected of them, you will not be operating on parallel tracks. If the team's purpose is to clear right of way by an absolute deadline, or if the deadline is more fluid and the overall purpose is mutual problem solving, be sure the team knows that.

If members are expected to attend weekly meetings and make progress reports on assigned tasks, make sure they know it and are willing to live up to that responsibility. If they are expected to share information which may be of interest to other team members, make sure they know how frequently, and in what manner, they are expected to do so.

2. Communicate Early and Often. Clear and frequent communication should be one of the hallmarks of your team. Communication from the very beginning of the project insures that you set the tone immediately, and all the other members are aware that they are expected to follow that norm as well. E-mail is a perfect tool for this work. Simply sending short updates to all team members maintains and fosters the open communication that is so important.

But even more importantly, the team leader (project manager) must always respond promptly to any inquiry or request from a team member. A delayed response is a denied response—it damages morale, destroys trust and eliminates any chance of camaraderie.

3. Focus on Results. Whenever specific tasks are assigned to team members, then specific and reasonable deadlines should also be assigned. This insures that the team is focused within the project timeframe. Deadlines get everyone's attention, because no one likes to be on the hot seat. Assign progress reports, in which team members have to admit any unfulfilled responsibilities. Since teams are made up of individuals, personal conflicts and issues are inevitable. Focusing on results will allow your team to ignore these conflicts as much as possible.

4. Expect the Best. Get the best-qualified people you can find for your team. Always treat them as professionals, especially in their own particular area of expertise. Acknowledge and respect their contributions, and they will perform to the best of their abilities. While this may sound simplistic, it is of the utmost importance to your team, and to the result you are trying to achieve. Qualified and talented professionals, treated with the respect and attention that they deserve, will work hard to provide you with the best results that they are capable of producing.

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5. Work to Include Everyone. Strive to encourage open, honest, and positive discussion. Listen to the feedback with an open mind. Try to have everyone park his or her ego at the door. We would all do well to remember this simple statement: "It is amazing what can be accomplished when no one cares who gets the credit." Actively seek comment, especially if you have to ask for it. The proper mix of inclusiveness (the active seeking of input and participation) with respect (listening with an open mind) will lead to consensus (the formulation of unique, creative, and collaborative solutions). The whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Intellectual cross-pollination can lead to some amazing insights.

6. Somebody Take the Lead. One person must be in charge; must make sure that the appropriate team is formulated; that they are invited to the table and actively involved; and, keep his/her eye on the target while making sure that everyone else does the same.

The leader has to lead! Sometimes that means recognizing those team members who are doing their part, and dealing with those who are not. Based on the golden rule, "He who has the gold gets to make the rules," the lead should be taken by the customer/client. The consultant should be the last person to take the lead. In agency situations, the project manager should take the lead not one of the specialists or lower level staff. So ask yourself: "If no one takes the lead and the project falls apart, who will get the blame?" If the finger points to you, then you had better give serious consideration to taking the lead.

SUMMARY

Building a solid project team and maintaining open lines of communication are essential tools in efficiently managing right-of-way projects. The effort put in to these tasks will pay vast dividends in terms of maximized performance by team members, early warning on problems, and development

of innovative solutions. Those involved in a project should be aware of the other aspects of the project and share the information they glean during their work.

If you don't have experience in team building, I believe that following the six rules that I have laid out will give you a real solid head start on creating an effective team:

1. Have a clear purpose and well defined expectations
2. Communicate early and often
3. Focus on results
4. Expect the best
5. Work to include everyone
6. Somebody take the lead.

I hope that these suggestions will be of benefit to you. I know that they have worked well for me. ■

James F. Braun, SR/WA has a total of more than 25 years of experience in planning and right of way projects. Manager of JWA/HMB Indiana's Right of Way Division for the past two years, Jim is responsible for directing the right of way phases of major highway projects and utility improvements in Kentucky. Jim served the City of Louisville, Kentucky as both Urban Renewal Administrator and Right of Way Director for more than 16 years. His responsibilities included project planning, development, and the acquisition of real estate for major industrial parks, residential developments, airport expansion, and transportation improvements. Jim is a graduate of Bellarmine College in Louisville, and has a Master's Degree in Urban Planning from St. Louis University. Jim is a past president of Chapter 25, and currently serves as Region 5 Representative on the International Relocation Assistance Committee.

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