



BY LESLEY T. CUSICK

In the first part of this article, which was published in the November/December 2019 issue, the context for community engagement was described (when, how, where and why). Additionally, types of communities were identified: those of a geographic nature, of common interests and values, and even of a crisis/response nature. Finally, the different types of communication networks were introduced— both the formal (as often found in the corporate/project world) and the informal (typically found in communities).

This part two of the article describes the different roles found in the formal and informal networks, with a particular focus on the informal network since they can be the most difficult to reach or understand. Behavioral attributes of the informal network's participants ("Network Archetypes") are also described, along with key insights on where you can find these important people. Yes, you have to seek them out.

You Have Information

Consider that you are a project manager for a new infrastructure project. You have information and you are ready to share it with those in the project area. You're prepared to explain the rationale behind the project, what the possible routes are and to discuss the likely impacts. You know that the people you are going to talk with are going to be affected by the project, and you understand that they have a role in the project too – they can affect it through routing or timing adjustments and may even try to stop it.

You Need Information

Besides the names, addresses and public-source information you can find out about the people you'll be reaching, what do you know about them? What do they value? What are they concerned about?

You may find yourself wondering if all this even matters. After all, you have a job to do and that's to get your message out about the project and maybe these other bits of information are not relevant. But as we've learned, these community concerns are incredibly important.

If the project brings jobs, noise, dust, increased traffic, new workers on a temporary basis, economic growth potential and/or increased demand on social services or infrastructure, chances are high that the rumor mill is already active. The facts that you bring may differ significantly from what the rumor mill has spun. This creates an obstacle to be overcome in your trust-building and efforts to be a fact source. You need to get accurate information out and you must listen to what the community has to say. How does that happen?

Don't Just Announce. Engage!

Community involvement is not announcing a project to a community. That leaves no room for conversation. It is vitally important that an impacted community learns about a project before the decisions have been made. Additionally, depending on the federal role in the project, there may be other or enhanced community involvement requirements. For example, the provisions of Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations) may need to be considered.

Public involvement/engagement is a conversation – a back and forth. The conversation primarily needs to involve the people who are directly affected, but those who are indirectly affected, such as commuters, also need to be included. Remember, they are part of a community (or multiple communities) and they will talk within their networks. If you miss that fact, you have the potential to be engaging

with people who were left out, may feel angry and are part of the social media community. Being sure that you engage with the right breadth of people to the right depth is essential.

Where Are the People You Need to Reach?

Consider your own patterns and routines. There are both structured and unstructured activities that involve your family, work, home, community or other types of service. It is when we are in unstructured time, at gathering places, that we are most likely to be ourselves – that may be with a group of friends for coffee, on a long run every Saturday, a community trash pickup, at a local bar or for our periodic haircut. The people that we spend that “down-time” with know us best. It is with some of those people that we may confide our concerns, plans and ideas. They know us differently than those who only know us in structured time.

If you want to find the people you need to reach, you need to enter into the routines of a community first, as described in depth in IRWA Course 225 – Social Ecology. You need to seek them out (RSI EnTech refers to this as the OutSeek method). That means going to the coffee shops, the parks, the farmer's markets and swap meets, the transit stops and other gathering places. Another way to think of where to find and define a community is to think of an interstate. People don't live on the interstate – in many areas of the country, the interstates are devoid of any signs of life. The people live beyond the exits. You need to exit the fast pace of the interstate and get onto the local streets to find the people and experience the communities.





Communication Goals and Roles

A project's outreach goal should be to avoid the divide that can separate the formal and informal networks in order to achieve project success. Unfortunately, sometimes the people sent out to engage with the community seem nervous, stiff or unreachable – anything but relaxed. After all, the project comes with schedules, charts and talking points. The community network comes with people who have a stake in the proposed changes. They may be angry and fearful because they feel threatened by your project. It is your job to talk about the project's benefits to the community. Most importantly, you must patiently listen to what they fear, need or want, and clearly explain what you know. Perhaps your project can alleviate the fear and address some needs or wants? You don't know that unless you listen.

An optimal way to understand citizen networks is to understand “Network Archetypes.” Behavioral characteristics and attributes aggregate to form archetypes. The Social Ecology approach to working with communities relies on understanding and working within communities and their networks, as well as recognizing the network archetypes. As explained in IRWA course 225, network archetypes play a central role in community engagement. Network archetypes are those characters in the information networks of society that sustain them in healthy ways. Network archetypes define the ongoing jobs within the networks that keep it functioning. Here are key characters you will encounter:

Caretakers are the sage individuals that hold cultures/communities together. They are routinely accessible to people in their networks, and are selfless, calm, trusted and respected. These are key individuals to know and engage with.

Communicators move information throughout the networks, ensuring that “need to know” information is transmitted accurately and in a timely manner. They circulate within the community and can often be found in the gathering places.

Storytellers carry the culture of the community through their stories. They can benchmark important community events over time that impart context, flavor and temperament. You can find storytellers in the gathering places (often with many people gathered around them).

Gatekeepers function as a type of protective device for the informal networks, screening out and in some cases deflecting outsiders, in particular the ones from the formal networks (i.e. project sponsors). They may point you to others that you need to reach, but they want to control the circumstances and will likely reach out to the person you need to talk with *before* you get there.

Authenticators serve as types of interpreters of a project's technical information to the community. They will ask questions to gain understanding, check for consistency and put information into a cultural context for the community. They are trusted by the community so it is extremely important that they trust you and your information.

Bridgers bring people together, often with one foot in the formal network and one in the informal. They strive to understand both sides of situations. They are keen listeners and valuable for you to identify and work with.

Opportunists are self-promoters. They speak in generalities and are known to be disingenuous as to their role and standing in a community. They draw attention to themselves, often speak the loudest and longest and are a magnet for outsiders since they appear to be knowledgeable and trustworthy. While they may have some knowledge to share, it is parsed for purposes of control.

Historians know the history of their geographic place from its beginning. They know the key individuals that have shaped the community over time, along with the key events and decisions made that contribute to the community today. They also know when and why things in the community were in harmony and disharmony.

The Value of Understanding the Networks

Learning the informal networks and the key participants in them are invaluable to your project and its ability to learn and communicate. By seeking information and sharing knowledge, you have in turn learned that you can be attuned to changing public attitudes, dispel rumors, keep the public informed of current and future plans, and most crucially – identify and evaluate citizen issues and discuss opportunities that are available to address the issues. In order to build the project, you need to build community support for the project. In so doing, you will have avoided (or narrowed) the great divide. 🌱



Lesley T. Cusick has been in IRWA since 2013. She is the Program Director for Community Outreach and Engagement with RSI EnTech, LLC, an ASRC Industrial Services Company. Lesley has over 30 years of professional experience assisting public and private sector clients with project development.