

Success

by Design

Building Strong Organizations... Strong Communities

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Building Community Support for Your Project

Communication is the Key

So you want to launch a project or initiative that you feel benefits the community? How do you think the community will react to the project? What can you do to bring them on side? Communication is the key.

Introduction

A new project generally represents some form of change to a community. Typically, five to 10 per cent of community members will support the project initially and five to 10 per cent of people will oppose it. Opponents or supporters are unlikely to change their position. The remaining 80 per cent, called the *silent majority*, are either undecided, indifferent or skeptical about the project. Failure to bring the silent majority on side can lead to opposition and seriously jeopardize the project. Various communication strategies can be used to win the support of this group. Open public participation is one communication strategy that has proven to be successful.

It's wise to begin consulting with the community right from the start. This helps to build trust, understanding and support for the project. If the project proceeds too far before the public is informed, there may be problems with rumors and the spreading of misinformation.

Public participation isn't the only way to gain community support, but it's a powerful approach for paving the way. This factsheet outlines key considerations and communication strategies for public participation in a successful project.

Where to Begin

Knowing your community is critical to building support. One of the first steps is to identify the individuals and organizations in the community who will be affected by the project. How might they be affected? What information do these people want and need? Could the project be changed to better meet their needs? What is the history of the community? Where have there been problems initiating new projects in the past? Who are the people with power and influence? What is the perspective of community stakeholders?

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Gathering information of this nature helps to develop a community social profile. This profile is vital to creating effective communication strategies.

Some Key Points to Remember

To build community support for your project you need to ensure that the community is well informed and ideally, part of the initial planning for the project. Any communication about the project must be open, honest and timely. Keep in mind that there are a variety of approaches suitable for reaching different groups of people.

If one of your strategies is to reach young families, you may want to communicate through the school newsletter or parent advisory meetings. The senior's activity centre, is a good place to reach that interest group. Quick lunch hour gatherings in a central location, might appeal to the working crowd. Some approaches may be more effective at different developmental stages of the project. You need to consider what information to share, who to communicate with, and when. Make sure you don't always rely on print material or meetings to get your message across. Think about how you might creatively use a variety of public participation approaches to provide information and receive feedback on your project.

Meaningful Feedback

Inviting the public to express its views and concerns about the project can help to enhance community support and ultimately the success of the project. As initiators of the project, you must be prepared to listen to, respond to and incorporate feedback given by community members.

If the community doesn't support your project, stand back and try to be objective. Maybe you haven't provided enough information. Perhaps the timing is off, or the location is wrong. Take advice from the community and let it know where its input has made a difference. If you don't intend to

use feedback, don't ask for it. There's no integrity in the public participation process if the decisions are already made. By allowing the community the chance to provide input, it will feel at least some ownership in the project.

Communication Strategies

- informal consultation
- use of media
- open houses
- factsheet with tear off response
- reference centres
- public forums

These strategies have proven to be effective in communicating with the public and building support for a community project.

Informal Consultation

This process allows you to keep in touch with key people, share ideas and informally gather their input over the life of the project. Pointed discussions over coffee or a few quick phone calls will do the job. This is a two-sided exchange. You want to share your ideas, ask questions and discuss your view of benefits of this project to the community. You must be prepared to listen to others' ideas, concerns and suggestions. This strategy is especially good at the beginning of your process. It allows you to test the waters and get a feel for initial community reaction.

Use of Media

Build a working relationship with the media. Get to know local media contacts and what encourages them to cover your project. Keep the media well informed with accurate and timely information. There is value in having a well informed, articulate project spokesperson to ensure a consistent, quality message. Consider using a combination of approaches such as print and broadcast media. Other options are paid advertising on community television or radio stations and in local newspapers. You can also

write and submit your own media release featuring the benefits of the project to the community.

It's vital that the key community people and project stakeholders are well informed prior to any media releases. "Let those involved know before the world knows!" Share project information with the community early enough that it still has a chance for input, but not before you have some basic support from the community. Whenever possible, provide a contact name and information about any upcoming activities related to your project. People are often motivated to ask questions or provide input after they learn about the project through the media.

Open House

This is the most common approach for spreading information in a community. An open house allows the public to learn more about the project and provides an opportunity to express their concerns. Ideally an open house is held in a neutral location such as a community hall. People can come and go at their leisure during designated hours, e.g., 2 to 9 p.m. Providing food and refreshments is a nice touch which may encourage people to stay longer and share their ideas and concerns.

It's a good idea to have project information on display. Models, posters, pictures and brochures can be used to cover different aspects of the project. You also want to have some resource material that people can take home with them. Be sure knowledgeable people are on hand in the display area. Community members at the open house want to ask questions. Another idea is to distribute questionnaires to gather community input and have a drop-off box available for responses.

Open houses can be used successfully at various stages of the project. They can be used early on to gather ideas and test initial reaction. When the project is near completion an open house can be used to inform people of project pitfalls and successes, or what is planned next.

Factsheet With Tear Off Response

A factsheet outlining the project, including information such as timelines, budget, features and benefits, or pitfalls, is a good way to inform the public about your project. Make the factsheet easy to read. It should be two to four pages in length. Keep to the essential facts of the project, both positive and negative. Factsheets can be distributed to the public via the mail, household drop-offs, grocery bag stuffers, newspaper inserts or any other method you think is appropriate for your community.

Be sure to encourage comments, questions and suggestions on all information. Many groups have chosen a tear-off coupon or a postage-paid return card to increase feedback and to monitor community support. An example follows:

What do You Think About the XYZ Community Project?

1. How will the project benefit your community?
2. What do you think about the proposed project idea?
3. If you are: — in favor, — undecided, — opposed to this project
4. What are your concerns about this project?
5. Any other comments, questions, suggestions?
6. What community do you live in?

Name (if you wish)

Please mail within one week to:

Mr. Somebody

Somewhere, AB

or use the drop off box at the door

Reference Centers

People appreciate being able to easily locate and access accurate and current project information. Possible sites for reference materials include the public library, the grocery store, the town office, an internet site or any other central location. It's important to keep the information updated and always include a contact name and phone number.

Public Forum

Once the community is informed about your project and if there are concerns, you may consider a public forum. In this approach you would bring together community representatives with a skilled neutral facilitator. Public forums give participants the opportunity to address concerns about the project, provide input regarding alternatives and help to eliminate any roadblocks that might exist.

The role of the neutral facilitator is key to this process. The facilitator works with the project organizers to design a process for clarifying issues and exploring options. It helps to set ground rules for the session. For example, respect an individual's rights to express his/her point of view, even if you don't agree with it. Don't interrupt a speaker. Everyone should receive a chance to be heard. This process is a starting point for fruitful discussion and building understanding between interested parties. One last step in this process is to communicate outcomes from the public forum once it's over. This can be done through media coverage, a media release or a flyer.

Summary

Building community support for your project is an on-going process. It requires a significant investment of time and requires both perseverance and diligence. Effective communication is paramount. Be sure to listen and take advice from the community. Let the community know where its input has made a difference. Public participation leads to successful and sustainable projects in your community.

Bibliography

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