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THE MYTHS AND MYSTERIES OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION ON PUBLIC WORKS PROJECTS

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THE MYTHS AND MYSTERIES OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION ON PUBLIC WORKS PROJECTS

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Abstract

Community Consultation - What does it mean to the Works Supervisor.

It is important to understand two vital components of the communication process:

Public **Consultation** is the two-way communication between an organisation and the general public.

Public **Communication** is the provision of information to the general public about a project.

Understanding the difference between these two forms of public communications is the first step in unravelling one of the mysteries of communicating with the public.

To consult is to provide information to the general public that will encourage them to participate in the decision making process. To communicate is to provide relevant information to the general public.

Why do we need to tell the public anything?

Why does the organisation waste precious construction time with consultation processes?

Why do I get constant interruptions on the job site from residents and passersby?

Why do the public continue to knock my good work and expert construction techniques? More to the point why do some people become self confessed experts in Construction and Maintenance and are believed?

Questions we have all asked at one time or another.

This paper is designed to answer these questions by explaining why we need to communicate with our public on construction and maintenance projects and how we may be able to go about this.

Key Words: Consultation, communication, community, information, input, participation, residents, construction.

Introduction

Good afternoon to you all, my name is Dalitta Ash and I am the Public Consultation and Communications Officer for the City Works & Services Division of Cairns City Council. What do I do? Pretty much anything the Engineers, Project Managers and Works Supervisors don't want to..... or in other words consulting and communicating with the public as part of our works projects.

I am going to take a wild guess at what you are all thinking.... "consultation, communications, public information, participation, stakeholders blah – who gives a damn we just want to build the darn thing. All this stuff is plaguing my construction and maintenance projects with variations, extra time commitments and above all they expect me to be nice to residents. As if my job isn't hard enough..... "

What I hope to do today is to assist in unravelling some of the mysteries and myths of the process and maybe even convince you that consultation can add value for you.

First of all what do all these words mean?

Community Consultation – the technical explanation - is a tool to facilitate the open, direct and culturally appropriate exchange of information between an organisation and its community.

In our language - community consultation raises awareness to residents about the benefits and possible impacts of your project or service. It exposes potential problems early and aids in the resolution of those problems. It encourages mutual responsibility, ownership and trust among the interested and affected parties.

Community Information – is the provision of relevant and factual information to the community regarding your project or service.

Community participation – what we strive for to ensure an open and accountable well focussed consultation process.

Stakeholders – interested and affected parties. Described as residents, ratepayers,

business operators and owners, environmental and all cultural groups and any other interested parties.

..... all that and I didn't mention "public meeting" once!

Attracting peoples' attention, gaining an understanding of their issues, providing concise and comprehensible information and engaging our communities in meaningful community consultation is a challenge.

The outcome depends entirely on our effectiveness.

Some of the myths.....

You may say.....

Consultation takes up too much time, the results aren't worth it! My experience shows that not consulting will save time initially but may also lead to incredibly expensive and time wasting problems later. Effective consultation upfront will prevent a public relations disaster and possible delays later on.

Consultation hasn't worked before, why should it now? Again, my experience shows that if the consultation didn't work it may not have been carried out correctly – but more on that later.

Consultation raises unrealistic expectations! When the process is managed effectively, all parties are given the same factual information, consultation and expectations will be realistic.

The community is overconsulted! My response to this is that people tell me they are not consulted enough on the Important issues that effect them directly. When consulted effectively the community will respond positively.

So, why should we consult with the community?

- First and foremost, in some cases it is legislation.

- Secondly, the community expect it – the new millennium has brought with it a wish for our communities to have a say in their futures. They also want to know what is going on in their neighbourhood and what will impact on their way of life.
- There are “no surprises” for Council or the organisation. The process should have highlighted all potential risks and issues in the design phase.
- We can prepare for the predictable ‘cheap shots’ that come from knockers because we know what the ‘shots’ might be.
- Complaints from residents or passersby will decrease because they are well aware of timing and impact of works.
- Relationships are built with the stakeholders. The stakeholders can then approach the organisation confidently with their issues rather than going to the media.
- A positive relationship with stakeholders will decrease negative media coverage.
- The reputation of the organisation is improved by a positive relationship with the community – trust is evident.
- Most importantly for our stakeholder – there is no confusion! Confusion will stop or hold up your project more quickly than conflict will!

State Governments have been consulting with their communities for some time now. Back in the early 90’s the Qld Department of Main Roads realised it had to get serious about communications. Its large projects were drawing negative attention in the media constantly. Giving them a bad reputation. Its consultation policy was not working, staff weren’t using it. Consultation happened after the decisions had already been made. What did the Department do about it? They developed strategies to make consultation a part of everyday life. The Department trained

project officers and allocated resources, implemented procedures, changed the culture and employed professional communications resources.

It is now Councils’ time to get serious about consultation.

Consultation is nothing new to Councils or yourselves, you have been consulting with their communities forever. But now we are starting to do it in a more professional and structured manner. The time has come when we will no longer tolerate people referring to us as those “fellas in orange shirts leaning on shovels”. It is time to connect with our communities, to be taken seriously as the professionals and leaders in the field that we are.

Councils are going through a major change as we speak.... Corporate plans talk about consultation and open decision making processes.

Generally speaking most Councils do not have the budgets for professional communications staff. The Public Relations Section is expected to pick this up or a project officer will run the communications component of a large project.

But how does that help you on your small to medium sized maintenance or construction project? Bottom line - it doesn’t.

A quick check of a few Councils tells me there are not many positions like mine out there, so community consultation comes back to you – the Works Supervisors or maybe it doesn’t happen at all.

Community consultation does not need to be complicated, messy or difficult.

Nothing will overcome people's increasing cynicism more than good old fashioned integrity and commitment.

Absolutely nothing new for you there. So how do we go about it?

A large project.....

1. Set the Goal – what do you want to achieve from consulting with the community.
2. Determine likely impacts – think about the real or perceived impacts of your project on the community
3. Determine level of participation – think about your goal and decide whether you wish to inform, seek information, make decisions or form partnerships.
4. Who is the target audience? – decide who you need to reach in order to achieve your goal. These are usually the people you will be affecting.
5. Plan the process – plan the process, timing and resource requirements based on the goal, impacts and target audience.
6. Prepare the consultation material and publicise the event.
7. Participation on the day.
8. Feedback and evaluation.

And for a small project.....

Exactly the same as above – just think on a smaller scale.

For example Cairns City Council has allocated funding to its Suburban Enhancement Program. This program is designed to focus Council's resources on refurbishing and upgrading the condition and appearance of suburban streets particularly those in the older areas of the City and surrounding townships.

In conjunction with the sealing works, when a street is nominated for work, other maintenance and enhancement issues may also be considered. In your terminology – shoulder sealing and kerb and channel works.

How the process works.....

Set the Goal

Residents/ratepayers support the proposed works

Determine likely impacts

Onsite works will have some impact on traffic movements

Determine level of participation

All directly affected ratepayers

Who is the target audience?

Directly affected ratepayers and residents

Plan the process

Write to resident/ratepayer - explain extent of works,

Wait for feedback from resident/ratepayers - determine level of support from street.

Determine course of action based on feedback.

Write to resident/ratepayer to advise commencement of work.

Start work.

Prepare the consultation material and publicise the event.

Write letter, public notice or media release explaining the project, if possible including time frames, extent of works, what impact will be on residents etc.

Participation on the day.

Ensure all residents/ratepayers have received their correspondence

Feedback and evaluation.

Did the process work? Measure its effectiveness – you will know as soon as you get on site if the consultation worked. Sally Stringbag will not be on the roadside yelling and screaming because you have blocked

her from taking Tiny Tim to school and she won't be telling you that she running late for work, the washing machine has broken and her husband snored all night so she's tired and cranky.

It is that easy... not complicated, not messy, nor difficult.

Remember to communicate all technical information in plain English. Everything we do in life requires communication with others. The greatest idea in the world is nothing until it is shared and developed.

There is absolutely nothing difficult about consultation or communicating with the public. What is difficult is stepping outside our comfort zone. If you find this difficult, allocate other resources. Could your administration officer want a change in his or her environment and enjoy getting out and talking with residents a couple of mornings a week....., you never know unless you ask. If not, have a listen to the ten top secrets of communication.....

1. Check your motive

Ask yourself, "What is my motive for saying or writing this?" if your motive isn't positive or productive, you cannot expect a positive or productive response.

2. Get to the point

If you cannot summarise your message in 60 seconds, you may not understand it well enough to communicate it in more detail.

3. Stick to the point

Make it clear where you are going and stay with it. People do not like to be kept in the dark unless it's a mystery movie.

4. Remember your body speaks volumes

Up to 90% of communication is visual. When you speak, your listeners are watching to be sure that your facial and body clues match what you are saying.

5. Check your tone

The written word, in particular, is often much more harsh than intended. Let important written messages sit for a day before you send them. Reread them for tone as well as content.

6. Say what you mean and mean what you say

People, while trusting by nature, are very perceptive and can find any hint of insincerity or credibility.

7. Listen for understanding

To listen effectively you must CARE for those you are listening to.

8. Practice, practice, practice

Writing and speaking, as arts, improve with study and practice.

9. Get help with tough communications

Bounce your ideas off colleagues or professionals. They can provide a clarifying perspective for you.

10. Simplicity is better

Complex, wordy communications may leave understanding behind. Clear and concise is best.

Conclusion

What I have hoped to share with you today is to unravel some of the mysteries and myths of the consultation process. I may have even been able to convince you that consultation can add value to your construction process.

I am sure you will now agree with me – it really is simple. You have all been doing this for years. The time has come to cover your butt and formalise it. We are all exposed to criticism from the community.

If we build a strong and healthy relationship with our communities, trust will follow. Once trust is evident the complaints diminish.

Another topic for another day would be the consultation process for a large and ongoing

project.

Until that time.... Happy consulting!!

Author Biography



Dalitta Ash is currently employed by the Cairns City Council, City Works & Services Division as Public Consultation and Communications Officer. She has been in this role for the past 2 ½ years. Prior to that Dalitta spent 3 years as Business Development and Communications Officer with Project Management Services, Department of Main Roads, she had a short spell in the hospitality industry managing boutique accommodation apartments after spending 9 years with Toowoomba City Council.

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