

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WHEN DELIVERING PROJECTS IN MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS?

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Abstract

Engaging the community and its stakeholders is paramount in ensuring the successful delivery of a project. Core to the foundation of Australia is our multicultural community. In a current project being delivered for Cumberland Council in Granville Sydney, the project manager is of Scottish heritage, the Contractor is Vietnamese, the Supervisor is Filipino and the delivery of this public domain project is to a community who are primarily Lebanese. As you could appreciate, there are significant communication and consultation challenges the project team face working together as each culture has different values and beliefs.

In this paper, I will identify examples and provide key decision-making community engagement processes that will provide the best opportunity for multicultural stakeholders to clearly understand and support the desired outcome of the project.

Key Words: Community, Multicultural, Engagement, Stakeholders, Public Domain, Communication, Culture.

Introduction

As a Civil Engineer who predominately worked in the private sector on sites isolated from any community interface, I had little to no appreciation of the importance of community engagement on projects. These projects had always been focused around the quality, safety and delivery of the company's business case. Key stakeholders fully supported these projects, their works sites were not affected and we all had a clear common goal. Deliver the project, increase revenue for the business and be proud of what we achieved. However, working for local government on public domain projects on tight budgets with a variety of key stakeholders from a range of multicultural backgrounds proves to be a greater challenge than anticipated.

Buy In

All projects and particularly public domain projects begin with a clear purpose to upgrade the existing streetscape to provide a more attractive and desirable area for customers to visit local businesses. Public Art is sometimes

added to provide a "beacon" for the community to reference and Councils look at encouraging outdoor eating areas. The community typically responds positively with the proposed introduction of street furniture, landscaping, trees to soften the streetscape and new paving on the footpaths at the entry to their shops.

So how does Council engage with the community to ensure that the key stakeholders have significant buy in and understand what is proposed for the upgrade? One of the challenges that is regularly faced is that diverse cultures undertake and operate business to suit their beliefs. For example, there is no point in widening the existing footpath areas if the local multicultural community prefer to sit inside away from pedestrian movements and vehicles passing by. Some Asian cultures prefer to site inside restaurants, packed in snugly enjoying their noodles of choice and being away from dust and noise that outdoor dining sometimes provides. Similarly, some multicultural stakeholders believe that additional parking is paramount for business and that this has and will be addressed in the project. Unfortunately for most public domain projects, the only way to provide additional parking is through the

construction of high rise parking lots which is often not possible due to lack of available land in these densely populated areas.

Therefore, it is recommended that during the community consultation process the stakeholders or designated spokesperson visit a completed public domain upgrade site at another location to experience and assess whether this upgrade suits the needs and expectations of the multicultural community.

Cultural Differences

Diverse cultures have different values and beliefs which are reflected both at home and at their place of work. Businesses located within public domain areas may or may not be multicultural but they will certainly have varying expectations on what is being delivered. The community want to run a business profitably and prepared to feel some pain whilst the construction is completed but they need to be consulted effectively to ensure the end goal remains in their sight.

Often, Council's implementation department delivers projects in areas where they have minimal understanding of the stakeholder's culture. This poses a number of risks for the projects health as efficient communication and its context are not always fully understood. Diverse cultures communicate uniquely both verbally and in written form. A verbal conversation between two parties may end with one party member believing that a final decision has been made whilst the other member believes the final decision is still being sought. For example, if in response to one of your proposals your Japanese business owner states "that's difficult, you may erroneously assume that the door is still open for further discussion. In fact, your stakeholder, coming from a culture that avoids confrontation, may actually be giving a flat no.

Written communication can also be a miscommunicated to the multicultural stakeholders. Often what is written isn't correctly interpreted or even read properly by the community. The community is more focused on running their business than getting deeply involved in the public domain upgrade. An example of this would be the upgrade to existing footpaths. The notification letters and site signage clearly outline an asphalt type

pavement treatment but the community has already interpreted that the treatment would be full granite. Often once the community understands what the treatment is, the budgets have been finalised and the progress of the construction can't be altered without significant impacts to the overall project. The cultural misconnection can therefore provide the community and upgrade that they don't want.

Council's project managers and community liaison officers need to be appropriately educated in the areas of culture and beliefs for the applicable area of work. This will ensure that they fully understand and appreciate the most effect verbal and non-verbal communication strategies with the multicultural community. By using these strategies, the multicultural community will fully understand the proposed treatments for the project and therefore there will be less likely issues down the track.

Managing Expectations

All projects need to manage the expectations of the multicultural community through early consultation and continued consultation for the duration of the project. As project managers who deliver works for Council, it's also imperative that we develop a good rapport with the community. With reference to the ice berg analogy, often we become too focused on delivering to time, cost and scope without taking into consideration what lies beneath the iceberg in the water. All stakeholders are people. They have their own lives, families, mortgages and children to support. By undertaking the education of their culture and developing a good rapport with them, they will be more likely to openly communicate to you their concerns early. By building trust and open two-way communication this in turn improves the effectiveness of the consultation for the duration of the project.

A recent example of where good rapport is required would be during the construction of a centre median down a new public domain upgrade in Eastwood, Sydney. Earlier I talked about written and verbal communication and this was used to advise them that these works were required. However, it's not until the

works begin, the barricading is set up and the parallel parking either side of the excavation is removed that the multicultural community has a real understanding of how these works impact their businesses. The key is to identify this early, so before you reach this stage, you would meet weekly with your stakeholders and advise them on progress and the end date. By having a good rapport with the community and the Chamber of Commerce, it ensures that the correct information is being circulated between all business owners.

Another example would be taking advantage of the rapport developed once “construction fatigue” is being felt by community. Council could take the designated representative of the community out to a recently completed quality upgrade with increased popularity and customers. This will ensure that they can visualize and understand what the works plan to achieve. This then enables them to distribute the positive outcome to other community members.

Conclusion

No matter how much community engagement you undertake there will always be people that are affected and upset by the impacts of public domain works inflict on their lives and their business.

Given Australia’s strong multicultural population and with this to continue in the future, it’s in Council’s best interest to further adapt its communication and consultation strategies through education, appreciation of culture, rapport, communication and context.

These strategies would provide better outcomes for projects in multicultural communities whilst being delivered with minimal stakeholder issues and ensure further development in community consultation practices to take flight for the future.

Author Biography & Photograph – Chris Mackenzie



Chris is a Certified Practising Project Manager celebrating 14 years post graduate experience in 2017.

He studied at the University of Southern Queensland in the darling downs Toowoomba. Upon graduation Chris worked for large multinational consultancies working both in the design and project management departments on major mining and infrastructure upgrades both in Australia and overseas. Upon completion of the mining boom and with a view to settling down with a family, he joined City of Ryde and delivered a variety of infrastructure capital projects for the community.

Chris's memorable projects include working on the design team for the upgrade of container terminals in Ecuador, Sri Lanka, Jordan, onsite construction management of mining infrastructure projects with Rio Tinto/ BHP Billiton and delivering public domain upgrades for several local governments in Sydney.

As Senior Project Manager for COMPLETE, Chris is involved in the delivering a wide variety of projects for local Governments primarily in Sydney.

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