

Courageous conversations when engaging stakeholders – how to make them happen

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1. Introduction:

At times we need to have raw and courageous conversations with stakeholders about the projects we are working on in order to get better results and enable our projects to move forward. At other times we are engaging with stakeholders who are expecting more than what is viable or even possible – how do we manage those awkward conversations? How do we get started? What do we base them on? How do we manage the needs of the project and the needs of the stakeholders in a respectful way when we are both feeling vulnerable?

The approach taken in this complex engagement was based upon the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) framework for engagement practice, both the Engagement Model, the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum and the IAP2 Core Values. The engagement methods included several one on one meetings with directly impacted stakeholders, group briefings, two-week open house with extensive visual displays including flood model animations, a journey wall and a photographic library of levee bank types.

The results of the engagement led to a re-think of the key steps to determine a decision about the future of the levee systems for this Queensland town and an increased trust of the local government regarding their decision-making process.

Methods

The engagement methodology was based on several important principles:

- Transparency – ensuring that the processes were clear and that stakeholders and the community had access to information about the project
- Participatory and accessible – ensuring that the stakeholders and community had many opportunities to contribute to the discussions about the proposed levee system
- Building relationships – the council was committed to building relationships with key stakeholders including trust so that meaningful dialogue could occur
- Fairness – ensuring that all affected stakeholders were treated equitably and were given fair opportunity to challenge the proposals.

The methodology included 3 key phases:

1. Individual and group discussions with affected landowners to establish a common understanding about the project, the focus of the engagement including levels of influence, the opportunities to contribute to the discussions and how final decisions will be made. These conversations needed to occur prior to any information about the project went to the public so that they had an opportunity to hear about potential impacts personally and to be the first.

2. Broader community engagement to enable the public to learn about the proposed levee system, the feasibility study itself and the decision-making process that the local government and others were pursuing
3. Closing the loop session involving the decision makers and the affected landowners. This enabled final issues and clarifications to be aired by those community members who were most affected by the proposed project.

Findings and Argument

The challenging and lengthy engagement enabled those affected landowners to have a voice about what the impacts of the proposed levee system would be for themselves and for the community and to raise important issues for them as residents and businesspeople. This enabled the decision makers to consider what was important in their decision-making process over and above the technical and financial considerations of the proposed levee system.

Following the engagement phase on the feasibility of the proposed levee system, the Council set about a process that would determine if there was a fair value for money business case against some of the other options. This next step enabled the Council to address the critical questions that most stakeholders needed to have answered so that they could then make fundamental decisions in their own lives.

The courageous conversations led to a clear path for effective and timely decision making.

Conclusions

While challenging and at times raw and emotional, taking a leap of faith and having transparent and thorough conversations with those key stakeholders affected by life changing decisions can build trust and contribute to good project decisions.

All affected landowners had made contributions to the discussions and most on several occasions, stating the most important need was timing of the decision. The leaders were able to make clearer decisions about how to proceed with a project when there was inner turmoil about the consequences, concern about the life cycle costs and anguish about the uncertainty for affected landowners, businesses, farmers and their families.

References

IAP2 Australasia; Engagement Essentials

IAP2 Federation; IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum