

BEWARE TOP THREE MISTAKES IN THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

There has been a pushback against Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, often due to inadequate or poor stakeholder engagement. Effective community and stakeholder engagement is key to delivering successful projects, writes Jenny May

As many project managers know, it's virtually impossible to get an area development project, infrastructure project or public space redesign delivered without the support of key stakeholders. Yet community engagement is often unsuccessful. Why? And what are the alternatives? Here are three common mistakes made in stakeholder engagement and how you can avoid them:

'Community engagement works'

Community engagement logically focusses on residents, community groups and local businesses. However, even when done right - which is not always the case - community engagement alone is not enough, and can even increase the risk of a project not being implemented.

You need to involve all of the stakeholders: the individuals or groups who can influence the project, or who are impacted by it. For example:

- Policy and decision makers
- Local council departments
- Schools
- Hospitals

- Land owners
- Utility services owners
- Interest groups

The role and level of influence of each stakeholder on this long list varies during the different stages of a project, from ideas forming through planning and design, through to realisation and use.

Simply 'getting the community involved' will not work if the wrong, or ill-equipped stakeholder is engaged at the wrong time. Widening the range of stakeholders also helps balance multiple interests.

'Co-creation is ideal engagement method'

Co-creation involves a collaborative process with the different stakeholders, for example to produce a joint action plan. It is never an end in itself but an extensive process aimed at realising an outcome by giving stakeholders considerable influence.

Co-creation can help, for example, if stakeholders have specific knowledge of the area or are in a position to block plans. They can play a major role in making a transformation successful.

The 'Ladder of Participation' can help decide how best to involve stakeholders - from informing to self-governance.

In general, you move up the ladder as the stakes increase (stakeholders have more influence or are impacted more severely) and when there is a desire and opportunity to actually include the input in the plan.

It is a misconception that the lower rung of the ladder is a token gesture and doesn't really involve stakeholders. Sometimes it's better to just inform stakeholders rather than actually activating them, only to disappoint them later.

Projects tend to mix different levels of involvement. For example, residents are informed about new cycling infrastructure, consulted on the way their neighbourhood is connected to it, and they jointly decide on where the new trees should be planted.

'You need to get everyone on-board'

The third common mistake is that community engagement or stakeholder management are about getting everyone on board. This is unrealistic - there will always be opponents.

The three goals for stakeholder management in all projects are:

- A faster, smoother project with fewer delays: i.e., timely project delivery, and minimised risk of the project being cancelled
- Better and higher quality plans, incorporating local knowledge and wishes
- Lower costs

Successful outcomes

At VINU, we know from experience that a more holistic and strategic approach towards stakeholder management is key to delivering successful projects.

Thinking through who your stakeholders are, what their interests and level of influence are throughout a project's lifecycle, and how and when to involve them might seem like a potential source of delay and additional cost.

However, this approach will actually save time, money and unnecessary frustration in the long run.

Key takeaways

- Stakeholder management is much more than community engagement
- It is extremely important to determine the most effective level of engagement
- Not everyone is going to support your plan

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Stakeholder Involvement Ladder

