

Creating Positive Experiences Through Effective Stakeholder Engagement

There are many different industries and instances where owners of projects are learning how to create positive experiences with stakeholders. A stakeholder is defined as “a person or group of people that has a share or interest in something”. Stakeholders may be property owners, property or business managers, someone living or working in a property affected by a project, someone that accesses property frequently or even the general public.

Following are five values that have proven to be effective for engaging stakeholders:

- Trusting Relationships
- Open and Honest Communication
- Fairness
- Cooperation
- Teamwork

The first goal when working with stakeholders is to focus on building trusting relationships. Even though it isn't always easy to build relationships with stakeholders, it is important to always have this as the goal. As we are able to build these relationships we are able to better accomplish win/win solutions. Trust is most easily built by meeting stakeholders face-to-face and listening to their concerns. By truly listening we can better understand their needs, their concerns, and the information which would be most beneficial for the owner to provide them.

Open and honest communication is the key to building trust. We have learned over the years that stakeholders can handle “bad news” better than we would think, as long as they know we are being honest and responsive. It is also important to remember that communication goes both ways. Effective communication means not only delivering project information, but listening to stakeholder comments and suggestions, and passing that information along to the project team.

Stakeholders need to feel that they are being treated fairly during a project. In many cases, this involves extra time and explanation from the public involvement team. (creating models, etc) Even if a stakeholder doesn't receive everything that they feel they are entitled to, if they feel that they have been listened to and have been treated fairly, things will go more smoothly.

Likewise, stakeholders will be more likely to tolerate impacts if they feel that the project team is flexible and cooperative with them. For example, on a recent project in Davis County, a funeral home requested silence a couple of times weekly during funeral services. The team was able to accommodate the request and the project was successful. Although teams aren't always able to honor every request, when cooperation can be achieved it goes a long way.

Project impacts can also be tolerated more easily if stakeholders feel that they are part of a team. This requires that they understand the schedule, impacts and benefits of the project. To do this, the owner may host open houses, neighborhood meetings, and keep the public informed through flyers, newsletters, one-on-one meetings and project milestone celebrations.