Introduction to Sustainable Development for Engineering and Built Environment Professionals

Unit 3 - Preparing to Walk the Talk

Lecture 12: Effective Communication & Engagement

Educational Aim

When considering a ‘whole of society’ approach, it is essential to have a strategy to deal with the myriad of stakeholder groups that may be represented in a given project. ‘Strategic Questioning’ is provided as an example of an effective communication mechanism that can facilitate contextually sensitive positive outcomes for projects and decision makers. The multi-stakeholder engagement work by Alan AtKisson is also presented as an example of an engagement mechanism.

Textbook Readings


Learning Points

1. As engineers and built environment professionals, it is beneficial to proactively engage with decision-makers and stakeholder groups, to reduce the potential for conflict and to maximise the potential for optimal outcomes and successful innovations.

2. There are a multitude of engagement mechanisms described in the literature and there are numerous communication tools to assist engineers and built environment professionals in their day to day work. So, why are there so many examples where engagement and communication strategies have not worked? or worse still, were not even considered in a project?

3. Common reasons for engagement and communication failing in a project include:

   • Time constraints – an insufficient amount of time allocated for seeking feedback and engaging in discussion, resulting in the participants feeling rushed through the process.
- Budget constraints – insufficient resources (financial or human) allocated to seeking input from stakeholders.
- Miscommunication of information - particularly when information changes part-way through a project.
- Language barriers (in filling out feedback forms/ questionnaires/ attending forums).
- Cultural barriers (in attending meetings/ focus group sessions).
- Gender barriers - in seeking responses to questions and surveys.
- Demographic barriers (scheduling public meetings late at night, during dinner time or when participants are at work).

The consequences of failed communication may be relatively minor on a project, but there are many examples of the simplest miscommunications ending up in significant expenses, many days of frustration, stop-work notices, and even lost elections.

4. An example of the types of communication models available is presented in literature developed by the Planning and Information Services for the Government of New South Wales. The iPlan model spectrum goes from simply informing the society member of decisions made, to full empowerment of the society member to effect change in their community.

5. The final choice of predicting which techniques will be appropriate for different types of projects will depend on a number of factors including the purpose of engagement, legal requirements for engagement, who is to be consulted, the environment in which engagement is being carried out (political, social, cultural), and money, time and skills available. ‘Strategic Questioning’ is one example of an approach to seek feedback from participants in an engagement process. Developed by Fran Peavy, a social change worker from North America, Strategic Questioning is the practice of asking a series of ‘strategic’ questions that will elicit helpful information, this is then used as a facilitation methodology to encourage participants to explore new options and move to action.

6. Depending on the size of the project and/or organisation, there may be more than one communication strategy (i.e. for different projects, for different audiences). There may also be a person responsible for managing communications or even a team designated to this task.

7. There is a field of literature dedicated to community engagement mechanisms and there are numerous types of approaches. For the purpose of this course, we will discuss an example related to the sustainability field:

**Example**: Alan AtKisson, world-renowned facilitator and consultant in stakeholder engagement for sustainable development, uses a ‘Pyramid Model’ and ‘Compass’ to bring together stakeholders from industry, government and civil society. Using this tool, his consulting firm, AtKisson Inc., has engaged with numerous government, private and not-for-profit groups internationally to take action on significant issues.
Some students may have seen the animated short film called ‘Harvie Krumpet’[3] by Australian Adam Elliot (narrated by Geoffrey Rush). Fictional works such as this depiction of the life of an ‘ordinary man’, and indeed many other popular novels and movies, help to remind us that when we are considering the challenges of sustainability, we need to also consider the enormous variety in human personalities, arising from differences including culture, demography (age), gender, geography, security and life experience. This is a key reason for the a ‘whole of society’ approach to project work and decision making; to ensure that we can achieve our goals, particularly when they involve ultimately changing values and behaviours.

**NSW iPlan Model of Communication Strategies**

An example of the types of communication models available is presented in literature developed by iPlan - the Planning and Information Services for the Government of New South Wales.[4] iPlan lists a variety of communication strategies for community participation. The iPlan model spectrum goes from simply informing the society member of decisions made (1), to full empowerment of the society member to effect change in their community (5):

An example of the types of communication models available is presented in literature developed by iPlan - the Planning and Information Services for the Government of New South Wales. iPlan lists a variety of communication strategies for community participation. The iPlan model spectrum goes from simply informing the society member of decisions made (1), to full empowerment of the society member to effect change in their community (5):

1. **Inform**: Activities include informative meetings, public notices, website, written info.

2. **Consult**: Citizen’s panel, Community Facilitation, focus groups, consultative meetings, public meetings, public hearings.

3. **Involve**: Facilitation, Planning Meetings, Precinct Committee, Focus Group.


5. **Empower**: Citizen’s jury, search conference.

Figure 12.1 shows a suite of potential communication strategies for community participation.
**Figure 12.1.** iPlan diagram showing the spectrum of community consultation approaches commonly practiced in Australia, and the level of public impact.

Source: NSW State Government (n.d.)[5]

**Strategic Questioning Components**

"Strategic Questioning" is one example of an approach to seek feedback from participants in an engagement process. Developed by Fran Peavy, a social change worker from North America, it is a different form of thinking about change. Change sometimes causes uncomfortable emotions including denial, fear and resistance. However, change also provides opportunities for new ideas to emerge. Strategic Questioning assists the integration of new ideas and strategies into the development of communities in such a way that people can feel positive about change.[6]

Questions may be that of Focus, Observation, Analysis or Feeling. They may be designed to deliver the outcome of: obtaining a vision; making change; considering alternatives, consequences and obstacles; personal inventory and support questions; and personal action questions. Strategic questioning is about asking questions that:

- lead to a strategy for action - a powerful contribution to resolving any problem,
- open up more options - can lead to many unexpected solutions,
- help adversaries shift from their stuck positions on an issue - can lead to acts of healing and reconciliation,
- are unaskable in our culture at the moment - can lead to the transformation of our culture and its institutions, and
- provide opportunity to listen for the strategies and ideas embedded in people’s own answers - can be the greatest service a social change worker can give to a particular issue.

**Extract: The Natural Advantage of Nations - 'What is multi-stakeholder engagement?'[7]**

Stakeholders are those who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who influence a decision, or can
influence it, as well as those affected by it. Terms such as ‘multi-stakeholder dialogue’, ‘stakeholder forum’, ‘stakeholder consultation’, ‘discussion’ and ‘process’ are commonly used by various professionals in the field. The meanings of these terms overlap and refer to a variety of settings and modes of stakeholder communication.

The term ‘multi-stakeholder processes’ (MSPs) describes processes which aim to bring together major stakeholders in a new form of communication, decision-finding (and possibly decision-making) on a particular issue. They are also based on recognition of the importance of achieving equity and accountability in communication between stakeholders, using democratic principles of transparency and participation.

MSPs aim to develop partnerships and strengthen networks. They cover a wide spectrum of structures and levels of engagement, and can comprise dialogues on policy or grow to include consensus-building, decision-making and implementation of practical solutions. MSPs come in many shapes: each situation, issue or problem prompts the need for participants to design a process specifically suited to their abilities, circumstances and needs. They are suitable for those situations where dialogue is possible and where listening, reconciling interests and integrating views into joint solution strategies seems appropriate and within reach.

**Extract: The Natural Advantage of Nations – 'What is the 'Pyramid'?\[8\]**

At its core, the Pyramid is a framework and a process for strategic planning. However, the framework can also be used as a training program for sustainable development; as a team-building process to build mutual understanding; and as a workshop structure for building consensus on new goals and directions. The Pyramid incorporates two other frameworks previously developed by Alan AtKisson:

1. **The Compass of Sustainability**, a way of representing the different dimensions of sustainability, and of supporting true multi-stakeholder engagement acts as the base of the Pyramid.

2. **The ISIS Method**, a logical thinking process that helps groups develop a more systematic and strategic understanding of sustainable development.

The Pyramid combines these into a structured group process to provide training, planning, or general decision-support for more sustainable outcomes [Figure 12.2]. To set the stage for understanding the Pyramid process, we must first discuss these elements in brief.
The Compass of Sustainability

This simple wordplay is actually an adaptation of sustainability theory first put forward by economist Herman Daly (and later reinterpreted by Donella H. Meadows). Daly proposed that these four elements, Nature, Economy, Society, and individual human Well-Being, were dependent on each other for their existence, and that each element was dependent on the one preceding it in a logical hierarchy. During a series of international meetings in 1999 on the topic of best practice in sustainability indicators, this hierarchy of dependence was challenged on a number of grounds. For example, in some cultures the overall Society is considered to be paramount, with individual Well-Being looked upon as secondary to social needs. Also, there are now ways in which the health of Nature is arguably dependent on stable economies and social structures. Out of those meetings The Compass of Sustainability was developed to stress, instead, the inter-connected nature of these four elements: all must be healthy for sustainability to be realized. The Compass metaphor also captures the sense of new directions that sustainability implies, as well as standing for the inclusion of all stakeholders: people come from all directions to participate in the process of sustainable development.

To define the points of the compass in brief [Figure 12.3]:

- **Nature** refers to the ecological systems and natural resources.
- **Economy** is the process by which resources are put to work to produce the things and services that humans want and need.
- **Society** is the collective and institutional dimension of human civilization, incorporating everything from governments to school systems to social norms regarding equity and opportunity.
- **Well-Being** is refers to satisfaction and happiness of individual people -- their health, their primary relationships, and the opportunities they have to develop their full potential.

These categories have been used to structure formal sustainability assessments and indicator systems. The Compass defines what sustainability is; and the Pyramid supports users through the process of implementing Sustainable Development.

The ISIS Method

ISIS is an acronym with the letters standing for the four steps in a sequential strategic thinking process -- a process that is particularly well suited to the demands of
sustainable development, where 'I' is for 'Indicators', 'S' is for 'Systems', The Second 'I' is for 'Innovation' and 'S' is for 'Strategy'.

The ISIS method ensures that change initiatives:

1. are developed in consideration of all the relevant trends and issues;
2. are targeted at those spots in a complex system where change is most likely to create the desired outcome, as well as other positive benefits;
3. draw on the full range of possible alternatives, and the creative thinking of a diverse group; and
4. are grounded in real-world thinking about implementation.

By following the ISIS method, the user stands a better chance of managing limited resources wise, and successfully creating a change in the target entity, a change in the direction of sustainability. The ISIS method can produce, as a purposeful by-product, improved levels of inter-disciplinary understanding and innovative thinking. When coupled with the Pyramid framework for running group processes, it can support group learning, planning, and decision processes that are (to borrow language from NASA) 'faster, better, and cheaper.'

Key References


