



Two communication networks at play in project planning and execution

BY LESLEY T. CUSICK

This is the first in a two-part series on understanding the networks encountered in community engagement. We will explore the structures of formal and informal networks, and provide insight on how they can work together. The relevance to projects is clear: informed decision-making—which has considered the change that your project will bring and the input from the individuals/communities that will be affected by that change—has become the only effective way to get projects built.

Utilities, departments of transportation, federal agencies and private sector interests almost solely rely on formal networks in their conduct of operations. The formal network supporting the project has budgets, schedules and the necessary personnel and structure to execute the project. Communities, on the other hand, are strongly inclined to have informal networks that rely on individual personality *types* to provide structure and focus. The number of consistently involved, informed and affected individuals in the community is most often small. The contrast between these two different networks is great, but they don't need to cause "The Great Divide," where nothing gets built besides tension and anger. The networks can work together if the project takes initiative and dedicates time to engage with the affected communities.

Engaging Communities

When? Early/as part of the project plan.

How? With individuals who know how to listen and discern issues, interests and concerns.

Where? In the communities, where the people live and gather.

Why? If the investment of time isn't made, there is an increased likelihood that the small number of involved community members can be transformed into a large number of unaffected individuals who adopt the opposition to your project as their cause. They may or may not have money, but they certainly have time—*your project's* time and by default, its budget.

The Social Ecology approach to project work can avoid The Great Divide and narrow the gap between project needs and community interests. Key aspects of this article are drawn from the seminal work of the late Dr. Lynton Caldwell, as well as Joel Garreau, James Kent, Trish Malone, Kevin Preister and personal project experiences over time.

Social Ecology has its origins in the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. In its most basic definition is the idea of understanding the relationship between the physical and social environments in a specific place, as well as recognizing that people are a part of their environment. This narrowing actually *creates space* for the project team to explain and clarify the purpose and need for the project, its technical requirements and objectives, and put them alongside the issues and concerns of the affected communities in the project area. Identification of the areas of sensitivity, disagreement or uncertainty are the spaces where reasonable alternatives and compromises can be generated. While alternatives and compromises may not be what project sponsors hope for, they are superior and less costly than protests, destructive acts, injunctions or outright project cancelation.

Community: What and Who Will be Affected?

Just what is a community? In terms of project planning, community includes all of the homes and businesses (and people within them) that your project will impact. The community is actually a subset of your stakeholder groups. In one aspect, spatial relationships define community, since it includes your immediate neighbors, your neighborhood, the part of town where you live and the town itself.

It's crucial to remember that common interests and values also define community. Think of how you spend your free time, your interests, hobbies, routine activities and the people you associate with during those times. However, the definition of the non-physical community can change – in particular to what it is facing or fighting. This last point is vitally important when planning an infrastructure project. When it's time for a community to “step up” in an organized manner to help in

a tragedy for example, the person you least expect to take a leadership role may be out in front of it. Conversely, the respected corporate citizen may be the one who happily takes direction from that leader. The labels of what we do from 9 to 5 are often dissolved in times of crisis.

Networks: How Communities and Organizations Operate

Even though you may not see them, they are there hiding in plain sight. Networks are the formal/informal organizational structures and the people who occupy them in particular roles, all working to make things happen. They are dynamic and respond to expectations, conditions and pressures. They exist in companies, in governments, in communities and in families. Once you understand *the roles* that people have within the network they are a part of, you are on your way to understanding how they work and how you can work with them to assist your projects.

Formal networks

Elected and appointed officials, corporations and government organizations are examples of formal networks. Formal networks operate pursuant to procedures and guidelines in a predictable manner to get things done. There is a hierarchy of ascending responsibility and accountability, either to a board, shareholders or the electorate. Expectations are established from the top and executed from the top



down. Organizationally, formal networks are vertical and there tends to be very hard lines between the levels from officers to middle managers to staff. The more conforming the individuals are within a formal network, the more the structure of the organization can function as an edifice, deterring the ability to listen to communities.

Communication in the formal network is linear with increasing detailed knowledge at the bottom and increasing policy or political skill at the top. Communication within and from the formal network is most often written or through press releases from corporate spokespersons, along with formal meetings. A key descriptor of the formal network is structure, with characteristics of predictability, efficiency and strength. These are exactly the organizational attributes that makes these firms the “go to’s” to get things done. Interestingly though, they are the *exact opposite* of what affected communities say they need in having their voices heard.

Informal Networks

Informal networks are horizontal in nature, lacking the clear hierarchy of a corporation but not lacking the ability to make things happen. Most importantly to a project manager, the informal networks do not lack the ability to stop things from happening either. The informal networks in societies form the structure by which communities sustain themselves and maintain cultural harmony and survival. It is when faced with an oppressive formal system that the

informal networks become more powerful. Social media is an artificial community network, but certainly adds to the power of a community network.

Informal networks are directly related to how people live their day-to-day lives. Being a more natural and more practiced state, the informal networks are quite strong and resilient. An additional strength of the informal network is that they know how the formal network operates and they know the names of the people in charge. Unlike communication within the formal structure that flows from the top down, the informal network has the flexibility to communicate with the highest levels of the formal network’s membership—and be heard (it’s never good press for corporate leadership to turn away community members who simply ask to meet). If a project is delayed and the delays are tied to an issue with community engagement, that is an indicator that the power has shifted from the project to the community. How can a project recover from that in a way that helps the community and the project? The answer is engagement, which is an investment of time to listen, be patient and practice humility. This is why you need to do this at the start of your project!

Helping Your Project Succeed

If you need to reach out to someone in a community to gather insights on concerns or to learn what the community sentiment is about your proposed project, you need to find the right people. Where do you go and how do you find them? Who knows the answers to your questions and who can tell you why those are the answers? How can you find the people who have something to tell you that you need to know but are afraid to speak out publicly?

Formal and informal networks alike can be equally puzzling to those who aren’t familiar with them or with the specific place where they are operating. Experience calls it reading between the lines in written material or reading a room when you walk into it. The people in the formal and informal networks who hold certain roles, such as gatekeepers, are the ones you need to seek out. ✪

Part two of this series will identify the different roles found within informal networks and define the roles by behavioral attributes so that they can be recognized. Also discussed will be information on where you need to go to find the people that have the important roles, as well as strategies for working between the networks in the space where there is room for progress.



Lesley T. Cusick has been in IRWA since 2013. She is the Program Director for Community Outreach and Engagement with RSI EnTech, LLC, an ASRC Industrial Services Company. Lesley has over 30 years of professional experience assisting public and private sector clients with project development.

