

Professional Practice Corner

Managing Your Stakeholders

By Jeff Maver, CCM
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“Listen... then respond”

These are three important words that we have all learned to live by at Heery International, Inc. At the outset of any project, it is essential that the Construction Manager first listen then provide assistance and guidance to their client in order to identify the project's principle stakeholders.

These individuals may act independently from outside of the project and consider that they have the right to influence the ultimate outcome of the project. Public projects are particularly challenging since you are normally interfacing with not only the individuals that hold your contract, but you must ultimately obtain their approvals through passage of specific board resolutions. Board resolutions require majority vote and if you have a voting member which is influenced by other outside entities or his or her own personal agenda, programming and subsequent design delays could very well be in the future of your project. Correctional facilities are prime examples where many outside forces impart their opinions and pressures upon county officials. Public opinion and gaining their acceptance with what they believe would be the correct site selection for a correctional facility can make or break a project. Make no doubt about it, this stakeholder's voice will be heard.

In other instances, they will represent your client as part of the “end user” groups which will ultimately occupy the completed facility. Think about almost any project with which you have been involved. Have you ever seen a head librarian, athletic director or food service director in a K-12 facility not work the design team tirelessly until they receive what they want? It seems like you are forever developing different design options, circulations, equipment specifications, bid alternates and then trying to keep these all within a specific phase's budget. Somehow the Construction Manager is always orchestrating this effort and will make it work out.

In either case, you must involve these stakeholders and make them feel as if they are the most important part of the design process in order to achieve a successful project. Ignore them at your peril.

“You assume a serious risk when you fail to recognize these transitions”

Identifying stakeholders is not just part of the project start-up. As many appear throughout the project, you must review and update this list at regular intervals. The relative importance of each stakeholder will change with time and throughout the phases of the project. Design phases which

run concurrently can take over a year to complete. In some instances, you might have public officials that are no longer in the same approving position that they were originally in once you reach one of the latter design phases. You assume a serious risk when you fail to recognize these stakeholder transitions or cooperate with your stakeholder once you do. It is very important to set the appropriate procedures and chain of communications at the outset of the project. Poor stakeholder management will lead to miscommunication, out of control budget and time management issues, uncoordinated and chaotic decisions being made and in some cases, a client having to accept a finished product that will not function within their desired program.

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At times it can appear to be a daunting and somewhat impossible task in trying to maintain the focus of or trying to obtain a commitment from your stakeholder. The Construction Manager must stay proactive in his approach and strive to obtain timely decisions and commitments. This is best accomplished at bi-weekly or monthly design meetings and through diligent schedule updates.

As we are all aware, stakeholders have an open and a closed or hidden agenda about what they expect from the project. In some instances, there will be those that will be forthright and look to gain as much program as possible in order to benefit the individuals that are working within their specific group. And on the other hand, there will be those whose vision manifests itself through the design process with the sole purpose of individual enrichment. There is a need to expose these expectations before you finalize the definition of the project and agree on the scope of the project.

It is not an easy task when there are so many factors that can affect their needs and expectations. Stakeholders operating from outside of the project could very well pose totally different agendas. These stakeholders with the possible goal of individual or group enrichment, might look to influence and ultimately hinder the progress or outcome of the project. At some point, the client will be “running point” when interfacing

with this type of stakeholder since the Construction Manager will not normally get overly involved with the final decisions that affect these individuals or groups. The Construction Manager can guide his client through prudent planning and advice along with imparting past experiences that have proven beneficial on other successful projects.

“Keeping these stakeholders efforts focused”

Inevitably, the stakeholder who will require the Construction Manager’s total attention will be the individual or group end user of the facility. Keeping these stakeholders efforts focused on making logical and timely decisions and how those decisions will directly relate to cost, time and life cycle impacts of the project is one of the Construction Manager’s greatest challenges. The Construction Manager must do this while understanding that the client and his end users will ultimately occupy the facility and are considering this their second home.

While balancing these managerial efforts, Construction Manager’s have learned that it is essential that the proper documentation surrounding all decisions affecting scope, cost and time which have been made and approved by the client for his stakeholders is in place for those limited individuals who might have convenient memories when ready to occupy the facility.

Stay true to your client and the decision making process. Manage the stakeholder as if he was your most important facet of the project. Because he is. **CM**

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