

Project Management: the Public Relations Deliverable Creating a Favourable Climate for Your Project by Ed Naughton



Changes in public attitudes and demands means that embarking on any major capital project will necessitate a battle for the hearts and minds of stakeholders (a stakeholder is defined as any person impacted by the project).

A key constituent of any such project will be the PR plan. It will span the entire lifecycle of the project from concept through to planning into execution and commissioning.

As the overall general responsible for the successful delivery of the entire project, the project manager will have to ensure that this component will be designed, executed and controlled just like any other major deliverable.

To a large extent, the project manager's ability, to control the project environment will determine his/her ability to control the project in terms of securing regulatory approvals and subsequently implementing the project within the cost, schedule and quality parameters.

Stakeholders' Perspectives

Typical issues and concerns will inevitably be raised by the various stakeholder groups. These will depend on a variety of factors including some of the critical project assumptions, real and imagined situations and trends, various public indicators, experience with previous similar projects and the latest fashionable issues currently being pursued by the media at large. Some typical project issues which have been encountered recently on high profile projects such as Luas, incineration, Super - dumps, eastern bypass tunnel, motorway construction etc. include:

- Safety - a major concern.
- What happens in the case of an emergency.
- Unless the technology is well established, there will be concerns about its reliability.
- Expropriation will create dislocation and widespread controversy.
- The project may become an issue in an election campaign. If the project is publicly funded, the possibility of cost and schedule overruns will be hotly debated - the Bertie Bowl.
- Ill informed news reports may undermine public confidence in the project
- Similarly, negative or inaccurate public statements can undermine the project, as well as all those associated with it.
- Environmental concerns such as pollution from project operations.
- Local neighbourhoods may be impacted by noise and congestion during construction.

Developing the PR Plan

Depending on the type, size and duration of the project it may well be that the PR activity should be set up as a separate function within the project directorate of the sponsoring organization. Since high visibility is involved, this will best serve the sponsoring organization's goals.

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Be careful, however, that the project PR program should not simply be just an added responsibility of an existing department, because the project priorities and time frame will be quite different, and specific project requirements may be overlooked.

Good public relations start with a strong identity, a planned program and concrete goals. In developing an appropriate PR plan, the following basic steps should be addressed:

- Know the project organization and its objectives thoroughly.
- Determine who the interested parties will be and the characteristics of each.
- Establish the relative importance of each to the project, and in particular, identify the "high risk" areas.
- Assess the current reputation of the sponsoring organization as it is perceived by each of the interested publics.
- Determine appropriate action in each case.
- Develop strategy, resources, priorities and schedule.
- Implement the plan.
- Continuously monitor the effectiveness of the program during its implementation and adjust the plan for optimum results.

As soon as the PR program outline and budget have been formally approved, execution of it must be worked out in detail and project progress milestones correlated to PR program initiatives.

Conclusion

The overall objective should be to create the most favourable climate in which the project can be implemented efficiently. A very positive effort is necessary to avoid confrontation with the public. The media is a fact of life in forming public opinion; they can be an enemy or an ally. On a large project it may be necessary to talk to them all the time.

No matter what the project, there will always be some criticism. The cries of the critics will only be assuaged by someone who has had the time and forethought to be ready with the answers before the outcry gets out of hand. Failure to secure regulatory approvals or the cost of even a short delay during the height of construction can be out of all proportion to the cost of a little foresight.