Achieving Success on Large Projects through Public Relations

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Introduction

The following paper was originally written with a public infrastructure in mind, and its affect on the local population. Examples of such projects would obviously include roads, rail, hydro, pipelines, and so on. However, the general principles discussed in the paper, allowing for appropriate scaling down, apply just as well to other types of project where significant numbers of the public are involved. In this case, information technology developments are also obvious candidates.

In the text, the term "stakeholder" is used to refer to anyone who has a "stake" in the project whether directly, as an employee, or indirectly, as a supplier of services. Sometimes the term "constituents" is used to refer to those who are simply impacted by the project, often members of the public such as a homeowner in the vicinity of the works or more remotely those who have an "agenda" such environmental activist groups or the media looking for a good story. In this text, both stakeholders and constituents will be treated collectively under the heading of "stakeholders".

If the project is large, significant, or critical, it will be necessary to mount a formal program that establishes and maintains constant stakeholder linkages. Often called a ***Project Public-Relations Program*** (PPRP), it is designed to deal with all stakeholders, including the public and the media, and requires expert staff to undertake this work.

A "Project Public Relations Program" may be defined as:

> A grouping of activities calculated to improve the environment
> in which the project operates, and hence improves its outcomes.

The same principle applies to a project microcosm. Dynamic managers have long recognized that opening communications in both directions – for top management and employees – is a powerful motivator. Of course, always providing that information of high quality and credibility is exchanged, whether verbal or in written form, or better still in graphical form. Project managers should then expect a remarkable improvement in team performance and in the progress of their project.

Beware of Negative Attitudes

On some sensitive projects, the term (project) Public Relations (program) may conjure up a vague and self-serving sales pitch. The image of a smooth, fast-talking individual, replete with well-worn clichés, is not a desirable one and in that case the term sends the wrong message. Perhaps a better term is: "Public Participation Program".

Unfortunately, this too has negative connotations. For those on the project team, it may conjure up a perception of interference with project objectives, escalating costs and schedule delays. Nevertheless, whatever the activity may be called, the purpose is the same: to obtain people's understanding and positive, and active support.

Every project team should bear in mind that projects have a habit of becoming the target of negative criticism. Those with conflicting interests may circulate this negative information. Special interest groups may seek to have the project delayed, or canceled to preserve the status quo, or otherwise "held to ransom" to serve their own political ends. Like bees to the honey pot, the news media is much more attracted to controversy, because they find this more newsworthy than any official project press releases.

The cries of the critics often include:
- The technology is untried.
- Safety is at stake.
- The environment will be damaged.
- The community will incur additional indirect costs.
- Taxes will increase.
- Some group or other has not been considered or is hard done by.

There may well be individual hardship cases that will attract political and media attention. In the short term, construction may result in noise, dirt, trucking, road restrictions and congestion. If property has to be acquired, some people's homes, businesses, or lifestyles could be affected. For example, a shift in the balance of the economy in the area could affect real estate values so that some win and some lose.

All these require immediate and effective response, and the only effective response is that which is strictly factual. The project manager needs to foresee these issues, recognize them as part of the project responsibility, deal with them honestly and fairly, and deliver the message with complete sincerity. He or she should also keep in mind that the public that stands to gain from a public project is not necessarily the public that is most affected by it. Therefore, vocal minorities may create difficulties while the silent majorities sit on the sidelines, leaving others to resolve the issues.

Establishing a Positive Attitude

It is important to understand that everyone who works on the project contributes to its image, and all contributions must be positive, yet without exaggeration. An effective PPRP requires a strong identity setup within the project, its own concrete goals, and a well-planned strategy to achieve those goals. It must also recognize, reinforce, and actively promote the objectives of the project. So, the PPRP must be evident at all levels of the project organization, and should aim at improving the credibility of the project team and therefore the team's ability to perform.

Whether the project is publicly or privately funded, the primary benefits will undoubtedly go to the project's owners. Nevertheless, there will be secondary benefits for the public, so the PPRP should be designed to promote them. Such benefits could include:
- Increased employment
- Improved services
- Increased demand for local goods and services
- A trickle-down effect of related commercial activities
- Increased primary and secondary contributions to local taxes

A PPRP has all the characteristics of a project in its own right, but it is conducted within the main project. It requires a leader who is outgoing and positive about the project, yet able and willing to listen. Such a leader must be capable of preparing carefully constructed text and presentations; of responding to media questions rapidly and honestly; and of working through a PPRP steadily and systematically.

The following eight steps are recommended for developing a PPRP plan:
1. Know the enterprise and its objectives thoroughly
2. Identify the interested public stakeholders, and the characteristics of each
3. Establish stakeholders' relative importance to the project. In particular, determine the high-risk areas
4. Assess the current reputation of the sponsoring organization, as it is perceived by each of the public stakeholders
5. Decide appropriate action in each case
6. Develop an integrated strategy that includes resource requirements, priorities, and schedule consistent with the project for which the PPRP is being developed
7. Carry out the plan
8. Continuously monitor the effectiveness of the program during its application and adjust as necessary for optimum results.

A typical philosophy behind a PPRP would include the following goals:
- To maintain internal project communications that promote a good understanding of the project by the workforce and members of the project team
- To keep the public up-to-date on the progress and performance of the project
- To be open with public information
- To promote and effectively respond to any misleading information that may be circulating about the project or its people
- To develop audio and visual aids and information sources that give substance to the above

The PPRP leader must design visual presentations to create confidence, trust, and pride in the project. Presentations should not be more than four to six minutes. If there is a technical story to tell, tell it in terms that a grade eight student can understand. The technical story should be in keeping with the short TV commercials to which we have become so accustomed. Too much detail must be avoided, but the presenter should be ready with such details for the time when a so-called expert comes along to question the project. A scale model, whether of the physical entity or one that shows the underlying concept, is an excellent demonstration tool and well worth considering.

Target Audiences for a PPRP Campaign

On most major projects the primary target audiences for a PPRP will likely include:
- The project workforce
- The eventual users
- The local community
- The community at large
- Special interest groups
- Elected representatives and government administrators
- The news media

Secondary target audiences may include:
- Business and professional groups
- Business media
- Labor groups

- Educators and school groups
- Taxpayers
- The industrial sector of the project

Those responsible for the PPRP on a high-profile project must be prepared for some typical issues and concerns that will inevitably be raised by the various target groups. These will depend on a variety of factors:
- The critical project assumptions
- Real and imagined situations
- Trends based on various public indicators
- Experience with similar projects
- The latest fashionable issues currently being pursued by the media
- Irresponsible news reports
- Fallout from any disputes or litigation on the project

Project managers should develop responses that are in tune with the current political climate. A sampling of typical issues encountered in the past include:
- Will the project cause safety risks?
- What happens in an emergency?
- How many jobs will be lost through automation?
- How reliable is this latest technology?
- Will there be dislocation because of land expropriated for the project?
- How much congestion and noise will there be in local neighborhoods during construction?
- What is the real cost to the taxpayer, including subsidies and the costs of budget and schedule overruns?
- Will the project become an issue in an election campaign and, if so, will the winning party terminate it?

Careful and constructive attention to these kinds of details is of enormous value in enabling the project to proceed in a smooth and orderly way. However, the PPRP should not become an end in itself, and therefore itself a target for public outcry.

The PPRP Work Breakdown Structure

With a PPRP plan prepared in outline, the PPRP leader must obtain approval from the project's management. The PPRP should be part of the project's work breakdown structure (WBS), see Figure 1, with its own line item in the project budget. It is wrong for the PPRP to be left to an existing department in the enterprise as an added workload, lest it gets overlooked, or becomes secondary in importance to on-going operations.

The PPRP plan must be complete with detailed objectives, target dates to match the progress of the project, the resources required, detailed costing, and identification of performance measures.
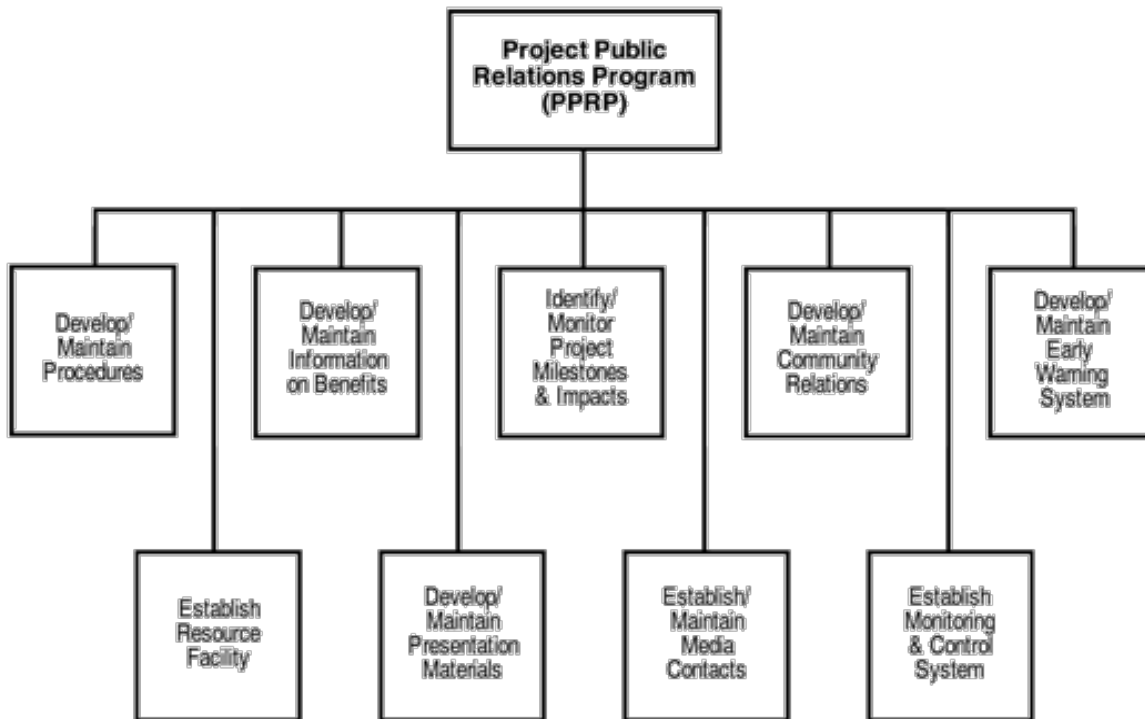
Figure 1: The PRPP component of the project WBS

For example, a detailed set of PPRP objectives might look like the following:

1. Develop and maintain a PPRP that ensures that timely, accurate, consistent, and relevant information is presented to the project's primary audiences.
2. Develop internal project procedures that ensure the availability of accurate and consistent information that emphasizes the team approach.
3. Establish a resource facility that monitors, researches, collects, and collates information as it relates to the project.
4. Develop material that clearly explains the economic benefits of the project to business, labor, and others.
5. Develop and maintain information packages, presentations, and events, including safety on the project, that show pertinent information to community groups, educators, professionals, school groups, and others.
6. Identify and monitor milestones during the project and their impact on, or opportunities for, the PPRP.
7. Establish news media contacts that keep key writers and editors fully informed, especially those who appear sympathetic toward the projects.
8. Develop a community-relations program that responds to public issues and concerns relating to the project.
9. Monitor and control the PPRP to ensure optimum benefit to the project.
10. Develop a system of review and contacts that can provide an early warning about activities by outsiders that may adversely affect the project.

Each of these objectives is elaborated into a detailed task list. For example, Item 7 which suggests establishing and maintaining media contact, may require completion of the following tasks:
- Develop a telephone listing of local television stations, radio stations, news wire services, newspapers, local politicians, and other frequently called numbers.

- Develop and maintain news media mailing lists suitable for the circulation of project news releases, articles, or features intended for the audiences in the primary and secondary target areas.
- List names and addresses of elected representatives, administrators, and others who will receive project news releases.
- Schedule a series of contact meetings with key media representatives who have appropriate spheres of influence.
- Notify key project personnel who will attend such meetings.
- Hold a seminar to discuss the advantages of the latest technology incorporated into the project.
- Arrange to hold an open house when work on the project is sufficiently well advanced.
- See that notices go out in good time for maximum impact.

A PPRP effort is significant, especially for a large project with public involvement and sensitive issues. At critical times, or at specific locations, a weekly newsletter can be very helpful to inform local people of unavoidable temporary disruption. People are willing to put up with a lot more, if they know what is going on and that it is only for a limited time.

Key to the success of a PPRP is the constant garnering of majority opinion and adjustment of the program details for optimum effect. To a surprising extent, the project team's ability to exercise such positive communications can also have a significantly favorable impact on the team's ability to control the project's schedule and cost.

If the project is a major one, especially if it is publicly funded, establishing such a program is essential.

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