



RESEARCH NETWORK *for* BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

Engaging the Community: An Executive Briefing

A synthesis of academic and practitioner knowledge
on Best Practices in Community Engagement

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Best Practices in Community Engagement

Many companies participate in addressing social issues in their communities. Scottish Power’s “School to Work Programme” gives low academic achievers at high school an opportunity to gain employable skills. Investment management firm AGF formed an ongoing partnership with WWF-Canada in the 1980s to raise awareness about the Sumatran tiger, AGF’s corporate symbol. Construction projects routinely involve public consultation as part of the planning process. Shell has elevated its ongoing partnership with environmental non-profit Living Earth to a “strategic institutional relationship”.

As any of these companies will attest, successful community engagement involves complex decisions on who to engage with, how, and with what likely result. Based on an analysis of over 200 academic and practitioner sources, here we suggest some ways of thinking about the “who”, “how” and “why” of community engagement.

Who is your “community”?

The first challenge is to understand who to engage with. This is not straightforward, since “communities” may consist of individual citizens, or of organized groups of citizens. We found a wide variety of communities in our study, but broadly communities consist of individuals linked by:

- **Geography:** people in the same geographic location (e.g. residents; community associations...)
- **Interaction:** people who regularly interact with each other (e.g. online networks; sports leagues...)
- **Identity:** people who share a set of beliefs, values or experiences (e.g. environmental activists; cancer survivors...)

A good starting point is to think through your own organization’s geography, interactions and identity to identify relevant individuals and groups. Managers should also make genuine attempts to identify who in the community has formal or informal authority, and whether the community has the skills or resources to participate in engagement. While it might not be possible to engage with all members of all relevant communities, a transparent community identification process will help build goodwill and trust.

How to Engage: “Giving Back”, “Building Bridges” or “Changing Society”?

A powerful concept is a “continuum of community engagement” ranging from transactional, to transitional and transformational engagement (see Table on next page for details). Transactional engagement such as Scottish Power’s training scheme and other forms of philanthropy is based on “giving back” through community investment. Transitional engagement is common in construction project public consultations. Companies aim to “build bridges” through community involvement and two-way communication. Shell and Living Earth are an example of transformational engagement, which moves beyond PR into “changing society” through deep interactions with strategic community partners.

Despite the potential for community empowerment and “changing society” through transformational engagement, the research

suggests that most firms send donations or one-way communications to communities, or conduct limited two-way dialogue and consultation. Indeed, a key finding is that while commentators often encourage companies to strive for “changing society” through transformational engagement, “giving back” through the donation of dollars, time and employee skills can be a successful strategy. The important point is to select fit-for-purpose techniques to meet your company’s strategic objectives. Common pitfalls include attempting to cultivate too many different transformational partnerships (which could lead to overload in your community engagement team), or talking a “changing society” talk while only pushing out one-way corporate communications (which might lead to justifiable community frustration).

DIMENSION	TRANSACTIONAL ENGAGEMENT	TRANSITIONAL ENGAGEMENT	TRANSFORMATIONAL ENGAGEMENT
CORPORATE STANCE	“Giving Back” Community Investment	“Building Bridges” Community Involvement	“Changing Society” Community Integration
TYPICAL ACTIVITIES	Information sessions Charitable donations Employee volunteering	Dialogue Community Consultation Cause Marketing	Joint project management Joint decision-making
COMMUNICATION	One-way	Two-way	Two-way
NUMBER OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS	Many	Many	Few
INTERACTION FREQUENCY	Occasional	Repeated	Frequent
LEARNING	Transferred from firm	Transferred to firm	Jointly generated

Why Engage? Measuring and Communicating Engagement Results

Our study suggested three main payoffs from engagement: benefits to the community, benefits to the firm, and benefits shared jointly by both the firm and community. Communities can gain charitable dollars, employee volunteers, training, capacity building and assistance in addressing social problems. For firms, engagement benefits are usually long term, based on improved legitimacy, credibility and trust with stakeholders. Engagement can also develop valuable strategic assets such as improved risk management, enhanced employer attractiveness or more effective promotion to the community.

Only transformational engagement can lead to shared benefits to both parties. Firms which desire a genuine shared ownership of

problems and solutions, shared accountability and richer relationships must follow a transformational approach.

Evaluation tools should consist of a balanced mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators capturing the input, output and outcomes dimensions of engagement which align with the firm's objectives. It's worth remembering that the very act of gathering data and reporting on the engagement so as to learn from it improves employee awareness of community and social issues.

While academic research on community engagement contains a very large number of suggestions as to what companies should do, there is very little hard evidence of what works and when. Best practices in community engagement should be driven by a set of principles to build trust, goodwill and respect, rather than shaped by particular techniques. Firms should strive for a fit between the “who”, “how” and “why” of community engagement.

Our Top Pick Community Engagement Resources

Top Pick for Best Practice Principles for Community Engagement

- “Leading Practice Principles” in “[Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System](#)”, New South Wales Government, Australia

Top Pick for Tips for Successful Engagement Technique Implementation

- “Public Participation Toolbox”, [International Associate for Public Participation \(IAP2\)](#)

Top Pick for Measuring Community Engagement

- [The London Benchmarking Group](#) Input/Output Matrix

Top Pick for Benchmarking Philanthropic Donations in Canada

- “Business Contributions to Canadian Communities”, [Imagine Canada](#)