THE CATALYST

Deepening Stakeholder Relations for Change

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By: | Posted: September 9, 2020

Why is authentic stakeholder engagement important in KT?

We discussed identifying and engaging stakeholder in an earlier post, but how do you move beyond that initial contact and why is it important to do so? Relationships are incredibly important, and our projects cannot go very far if we do not have support and buy in from those around us who can make things happen and support the implementation of our innovations.

> "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much"
>
> ***~ Helen Keller***

Authentic engagement moves past a simple ask and builds a relationship to support positive, lasting change where everyone involved understands and supports the knowledge and action in a meaningful way. Beyond engaging for the purpose of implementing your innovation, it is important for you to understand your stakeholders, their needs, their strengths and the way they work. This can shape how you approach knowledge translation to ensure it has the greatest impact.

Moving past initial contact for meaningful engagement

So, you've made your first contact, your stakeholder seems to have an interest and it looks like you've got some common ground. How do you deepen that and move to the level of collaboration or partnership if that is where you are hoping to go with things? Below are some things you can do to move toward more meaningful stakeholder relations.

1. Schedule a "coffee" either virtually or in person. In previous roles as a community developer, whenever taking a new position in a new neighbourhood, one of my favourite things to do was my "100 cups of coffee" initiatives. Being new and not knowing anyone, it was a great way to develop stakeholder and community relationships. You make your initial contact through formal means, but the cup of coffee helps to take down the walls and help you to connect on a more individual and interpersonal level, to explore commonalities and alignment. If you go this route, be sure to prepare some questions and conversation starters in advance to help facilitate a smooth, meaningful conversation and "break the ice". Try to build it in your project budget to cover the costs of the coffee or other drink of choice whenever possible, this takes the cost burden out of the equation of an in person "coffee"

2. Keep track of conversations and record ideas and potential alignment that are discussed. This approach will help you build on conversations, follow up on things and explore options. You might want to gather more information on a potential idea and circle back to develop it further.

3. Always ask if there is someone else to whom you should be talking. We don't know what we don't know, and sometimes there are other connections that are important to engage that we have never thought of. Including your existing stakeholders in this exploration strengthens the relationship and also furthers your project.

4. Always follow up with appreciation. Whenever you have initiated a conversation, follow up with a quick email to appreciate the stakeholder for their time and conversation. Highlight the valuable learning you have gained from spending time with them.

5. Don't forget that relationships are give and take. Make sure your conversations and interactions are not just all about what you need from them and take an interest in their work and achievements. Make it your business to understand their work and the value it brings to a community, organization or a sector. Is there anything that their relationship with you can bring to the table or any meaningful connections you can provide that might help them be effective in their work?

It is worth the effort!

Putting focused time and effort into developing relationships with the right stakeholders can make a huge difference in in the results of your project and the effectiveness of the knowledge translation. Don't get discouraged if things don't take off right away, keep working on building each relationship and be mindful of timing and opportunity. If now is not the right time to develop a meaningful connection, perhaps a window will open in the near future!

Helpful tools and resources

The Engagement Funnel (Tamarack Institute)
https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/engagement-funnel

BSR's stakeholder engagement tools: https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/stakeholder-engagement-five-step-approach-toolkit

International Association for Public Participation's IAP2 Spectrum of Engagement:

English: https://iap2canada.ca/Resources/Documents/0702-Foundations-Spectrum-MW-rev2%20(1).pdf

French: https://www.iap2canada.ca/resources/FR/Documents/AIP2Canada-Spectrum-FINAL-2016.pdf

Research to Action's list of resources to help support stakeholder engagement:
https://www.researchtoaction.org/2015/09/stakeholder-mapping-resource-list/

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