

Inside the *Invisible* Community

BY JAMES A. KENT

Politicians and staffers are often the last to recognize a change in public sentiment. Consider a project manager, told by a council person or mayor that a project was ready to move forward, only to get ambushed at a hearing by an unforeseen opponent. This scenario is more common than you might think.

In every community, there are formal groups and informal networks who constitute the public consensus. The formal groups are easier to identify, as they have recognizable functions like mayor, president, teacher, or lawyer. Because they are more visible, there is often a mistaken belief that they constitute a community consensus. This is a risky assumption.

Earning broad-based community support is critical to a project's ultimate success. If the project team is relying solely on support from formal sources, and have not engaged the informal network, then a false sense of security can follow.

LOCAL COMMUNITY ARCHETYPES

The informal networks are concerned about the health of their community. The functions in these networks are carried out by "community archetypes," and there are three significant types:

- 1) **Caretakers** are the glue that holds the culture together. Local residents will often seek them out for advice and information.
- 2) **Communicators** are found in gathering places and are known for moving reliable information through informal networks.
- 3) **Authenticators** carry the cultural wisdom of the people and are capable of translating technical project information into usable community language.

By understanding the different types, the project team can avoid potential pitfalls that can affect their project.

CHALLENGE

In Hawaii, a real estate developer was planning to build a gated community along the shoreline comprised of second homes and a golf course. Because the plan excluded local residents and deprived them of shoreline access, the project had suffered strong opposition from activists, who were backed by several elected council members. To make matters worse, the golf course would require enormous amounts of water and resources, and it was perceived as taking from the community without giving back. As a result, the project had failed to win approval several times.

SOLUTION

The developer, who had millions of dollars invested, contacted JKA in hopes of finding a way to move the project forward. After considerable time "hanging out" in the community, we were able to understand the underlying hostility and rhetoric within the informal networks. There was enormous animosity from the citizens, who resented outsiders for owning second homes that would sit idle for most of the year. JKA realized that there was only one way for the project to proceed - it had to be modified so that the citizens would receive a direct benefit from its development.

JKA field workers immersed themselves in the community and uncovered the archetypes. After identifying the neighborhood "caretakers," we began engaging them in face-to-face contact about their issues. As we listened and gained their respect, they connected us with hundreds of others who could give us feedback on what a new project should produce for the community.

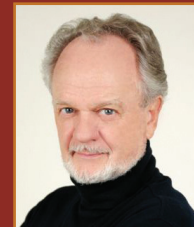
With the "communicators," we focused on replacing their old perceptions with accurate information about the new citizen-based design. We updated them weekly and took their input back to the

developer for reformulating the project. Given the unique culture in Hawaii, the "authenticators" played a critical part in decision-making and assisted with integrating the physical, social and cultural design aspects of the project.

From affordable housing to million-dollar homes, the new project evolved into a full-service pedestrian community where residents could live and work. By refocusing the project on local issues and requiring homebuyers to live there full time, the project addressed the community issues that were blocking approval.

SUMMARY

Becoming engaged with informal networks and understanding the unique impact your project will have on them is essential if you want to improve chances of project success. Project managers who spend time hanging out in various parts of the informal community will find that it is time well spent. Gathering places are the best place to start. You can pinpoint where and when your supporters will emerge by becoming involved in the invisible community.



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