

Relating for Sustainable Outcomes

Grahame Collier Jade Herriman, Hazel Storey and Phil Smith

The Context

Many readers of this short paper will know one or more of the four authors. You will recognise us as having a long engagement with sustainability and the utmost respect for the work of officers in local government around NSW in integrating sustainability across their Councils. In recent years, we have spent time considering some of the factors that are limiting our collective efforts to promote more sustainable results. One of these is an overly intense focus on the 'product' to the detriment of concern about the relationships that are essential to a sustainable present and future. This article considers the role of relationship in sustainability projects. It is written specifically for local government sustainability officers and their colleagues.

Local government plays, and must continue to play, an increasingly important role in helping local communities (householders, businesses, landowners, developers) respond to the challenges of sustainability (Wild, 2006). It is the level of government best placed to appreciate and respond to local issues; it is the level best able to build, maintain and facilitate good relations in and across the community (NSW Division of Local Government, 2009). Local government is also able to provide excellent models of sustainable practice in its own operations for the residents and businesses it serves.

In taking this work forward local government officers need to establish high quality relationships across Council, in the community and with other agencies and funding bodies.

The word "relationship" may conjure immediate thoughts of a personal realm - intimate relationships, family relationships, partner relationships. For other, more 'professional' contexts we often qualify the relationship, as in 'working relationship'. Sometimes in our working lives we just talk about connections. For the purpose of this paper, when we talk about the role of relationships in our work, we mean the relationships between people and groups/organisations that are connected through their mutual interest in trying to achieve sustainability, often in an official role where they represent an organisation, location, or interest.

As practitioners working towards a more sustainable future we are all working with and through our relationships – with community, with one another, with people in various institutions.

What do we mean by relationships?

We suggest that the vital relationships for success in achieving sustainability outcomes in projects are those between and amongst project staff and stakeholders including:

- Officers and managers from local, state, national agencies
- Contractors, suppliers and other business personnel
- Not for Profit organisations

- Schools and other formal educational facilities as well as the
- Target audiences for the project/s.

In the local government context, some common examples include: an environment officer working within a cross council team to progress corporate sustainability goals; a local Bushcare volunteer or group that works with council over the years and has seen staff come and go; a council officer who coordinates an external reference group which includes business representatives and other government or state agency representatives; or a council working with a community organisation over a local development/protest issue.

Each of these cases involves two or more people who share some policy or program objectives, and who seek to achieve their ends by influencing the other through dialogue (and other interventions). Their training and experience or interests may be in environmental science, government policy development, strategic planning, activism, hands on environmental restoration practices, education program design (or similar) or even none of these. Yet the means by which they are brought together is through a professional relationship.¹

These relationships may be fleeting or ongoing; they may be defined through official roles; and yet may be unclear with respect to other parameters; they may be shrouded with hostility and mistrust; or perhaps there may be a sense of mutual interest in reaching favourable outcomes. In relationship we learn that we are more than our 'skin encapsulated ego' (Watts, 2005). In sustainability project relationships, we learn that there are different perspectives and needs; we learn that most problems and their solutions are contestable; and we learn that mutual understanding takes time.

Carrying relationships forward

Often though, and despite their best intent, our managers, Council itself, or a funding body inadvertently undermine our efforts to do our jobs effectively by limiting the relationship building component of the project. Sometimes we forget it too. It is not that they deliberately undermine or limit, or that we deliberately forget. It's just that the importance of relationship does not figure at all or prominently enough in project planning and delivery. There is such emphasis on the result or the product that people forget that it takes time energy and commitment to build and maintain positive relationships.

In order to enhance the focus on relationship building in sustainability initiatives, it is essential that funding bodies, senior staff and elected officials value and support the time it takes to set up, manage and extend quality relationships focused on producing ongoing sustainability outcomes. For example, this can occur through funding application and reporting frameworks (such as adding Key Performance Indicators related to relationships), giving guidance on the time applicants/staff might expect to spend building project relationships, providing training to successful recipients on negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

¹ At this juncture it should be noted that the situation is often more complex than the examples indicate. Often a number of relationships are being worked up at any one time and group relationships are as vital as one-on-one interactions

As a part of effective planning, project and program managers need to take time to map, identify and facilitate the crucial relationships required for the success of their projects. Respect for and recognition of the knowledge, skills and contributions that all stakeholders bring to Council-led sustainability projects is essential.

All participants in a sustainability program or project have shared responsibility to work on interpersonal relationships within that project or program. Project managers or co-ordinators need to take an active role in facilitating this process.

Relationship management is a pivotal, yet frequently undervalued, variable in the progress and processes of sustainability programs. We believe that developing and maintaining resilient relationships is a critical foundation for project success. However, not only do we need to be able to find the time and support to be able to build good relationships, we also need the skills in communication, negotiation and conflict resolution necessary for good relationship building.

Ideas to consider for relationship management in projects

Managing sustainability initiatives sometimes requires expertise in negotiation and conflict resolution. Skills in assertiveness and active listening are also of real value.

Even when there is no conflict or markedly different values, views or working styles, building rapport is essential to establishing and maintaining relationships. Strategies for building good rapport can be as simple as attending to basic conventions of good communication: using a person's preferred name when speaking with them, listening carefully and actively, explaining words and expressions that may be unfamiliar, not using jargon, explaining what you already know, explaining clearly any specific position you may have, suspending judgement, keeping lines of communication open, and summing up the discussion when appropriate. It may be that you need some professional development to build your capacity and your skills. The authors have put together a couple of different formats for workshoping the role of relationship in project/program development and management. Contact Phil on rephilled@hotmail.com if you'd like to find out more.

Finally, the project manager is crucial in the facilitation of the relationships within all successful sustainability projects. In your role as a project manager you can:

- ✓ Ensure the project planning process includes sufficient time at the beginning to build the relationship. This can include discrete tasks such as: stakeholder mapping, initial interviews with stakeholders, consultation on/review of the project brief with stakeholders. (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005)
- ✓ Get a sense of personal strengths and needs in relationship management. Seek training where necessary.
- ✓ Be proactive in developing working, professional relationships with others in the project and/or mediating the same (if required).

- ✓ Appreciate there are real people in this project with needs, feelings, fears, priorities... that are likely to be different to yours.
- ✓ Recognise that our different value sets or perspectives can create disagreement or conflict, and that we must work through them to bring about sustainability outcomes.
- ✓ Make a flow chart of relationships early in complex projects. Recognise each one and where they can add value or pose a risk to project outcomes. Develop appropriate relationship strategies.
- ✓ Develop an evaluation plan at the outset of the project with project stakeholders. Build relational outcomes into the evaluation plan.
- ✓ Clarify roles and responsibilities. Then clarify them again. Keep checking this.
- ✓ Set up agreed communication processes for all stakeholders - even those one or two steps removed from the process. Keep checking to see if they are working. Keep lines of communication open.
- ✓ Set up a process for dealing with disagreement. Central is a commitment to working together. Discuss decision making and feedback processes.

Building better relationships is fun (even when it's challenging). Enjoy it.

References

NSW Division of Local Government 2009 *Planning a Sustainable Future: Planning and Reporting Guidelines for Local Government in NSW*. Retrieved (10/10/10) from www.dlg.nsw.gov.au

NSW Division of Local Government (2009) *Local Government Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework: Frequently Asked Questions and Their Answers*. Retrieved (10/10/10) from www.dlg.nsw.gov.au

Taylor, A. 2010. *Sustainable urban water management: The champion phenomenon*. PhD Thesis. National Urban Water Governance Program, Monash University, Victoria, Melbourne.

Watts Alan 2005, *The Way of Zen*, Macmillan Audio. Wild S, (2006) The role of local government in environmental and heritagemanagement. Paper prepared for the 2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee, 2006. Retrieved (10/10/10) from <http://www.environment.gov.au/soe/2006/publications/integrative/local-government/introduction.html>

Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005, *Effective Relationships. Building engagement with community and other stakeholders*.

Citation

Collier G. Herriman J. Storey and Smith P (2012) *Relating for Sustainable Outcomes*. Local Government and Shires Associations at <http://www.lgsa-plus.net.au/www/html/3283-general-sustainability.asp#anchor4123>