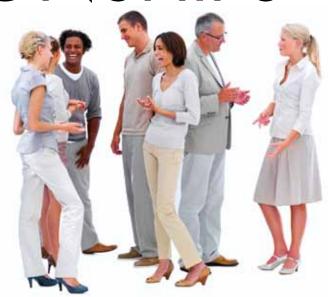# VALUE OF WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Paying more attention to work-based relationships can significantly help to achieve sustainability goals, write Jade Herriman, Phil Smith, Grahame Collier and Hazel Storey.

In business, working towards more sustainable operations and processes typically involves two or more people who are working towards similar broad goals and seek to achieve their ends by influencing the other through dialogue.

In the case of local government, it may include people with responsibilities for planning, community services, engineering, environmental management, finance, or any of a number of disciplines, sometimes also working across council boundaries in collaboration.

There is often relationship building to be done by those working in councils with their external agencies and local community groups.

Relationships can help or hinder project process, progress and outcomes, so efforts need to be made to build quality relationships. This may include recognising that developing and maintaining resilient

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relationships and high quality communication are critical foundations for success. It might also mean designing projects with explicit relationship outcomes, or allocating time, money and other resources to support the development of effective relationships.

Some of the academic literature provides techniques for change management and skills required to build engagement.

However, it rarely talks in detail about the need to recognise the time and effort required to work on the relationships. Nor does it give much guidance on how to enable trusting relationships to be developed with new staff, existing staff, senior management and customers and the community.

Within any initiative, the project manager has responsibilities in mediating, facilitating and supporting good relationships. They can set expectations and offer guidance, but they also need to be aware people are watching them for clues about how to behave in relationships with others – stakeholders, customers and peers.

But it's not just the project manager, contractors and staff who hold these responsibilities. All project stakeholders need to ensure good relationships are established and maintained.

There are a number of reasons why relationships are undervalued and at times break down. Sometimes this occurs because of a lack of commitment to the relationship building process and at other times because of a lack of capacity and skill in communication and engagement.

Strategies for building good rapport can be as simple as attending to basic conventions of good communication; using a person's preferred name, listening carefully and actively; and avoiding jargon.

Jade Herriman is from the Institute for Sustainable Futures; Phil Smith from KnowHands Education Consultancy; Graeme Collier from T Issues Consultancy; and Hazel Storey from the Storey Agency. They have created several formats for workshopping the role of relationship in project/program management. Contact Phil Smith on rephilled@hotmail.com **WME**

FACT FILE: TOP 10 TIPS FOR BUILDING WORK-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

1. Remember that building respectful and trusting relationships is the highest order priority for successful projects.

2. 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 and consultation on, and review of, the project brief.

3. Get a sense of your own personal strengths and needs in relationship management. Seek training where necessary. Use the skills of active listening, conflict resolution and mediation to establish win/win relationships and outcomes.

4. Make a flow chart of relationships early in complex projects. Recognise each one and where they can add value/pose a risk to project outcomes. Clarify expectations and responsibilities, then clarify them again. Keep checking this.

5. Appreciate there are real people in this project with real needs, feelings, fears, priorities. Accept they are likely to be different to yours.

6. Set up agreed communication processes for all stakeholders, even those one or two steps removed from the process. Keep reviewing these, check they are they still working and keep lines of communication open.

7. Set up a process for dealing with disagreement. Discuss decision-making and feedback processes explicitly in the group or relationship. Acknowledge that rational argument does not always win the day because, often, both sides believe their argument is rational.

8. Consider bringing in an independent third person to mediate where relationships breakdown.

9. Be aware that, at times, attitudinal change is required in order to see the community as partners in a project and work with them to build and maintain the relationships required.

10. Celebrate successes in the project. Recognise and acknowledge good working relations.