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Building Consensus for Your Project, Part 1

BY HEATHER C. CONOVER, PAULA GREEN, PATRICK FIELD, AND STACIE NICOLE SMITH

Part 1: Building internal consensus among the team

When marketing and public relations professionals think of consensus building in the realm of real estate development, they most often think of the “public” face of approvals. How can you address local abutters’ concerns effectively and at low cost? How can you stave off any groundswell of opposition to a project from neighborhood groups, environmental groups, smart-growth groups, anti-tax groups, or others? How can you help your client make it through the often contentious and painful public permitting process?

However, experience has consistently proven that building consensus is valuable during every phase of project development. Conflicts and unresolved issues early in a project, internal only to the development team, have an uncanny ability to spill out into the public process. And just because approvals are in place does not mean conflicts due to emissions, lights, noise, and construction traffic will be unimportant. Over the next four issues, we’ll explore the unique needs and nature of consensus building in initial project development, pre-permitting, permitting, and construction.

The need for a highly functioning team

In order to make decisions about the size, shape, uses, design, and construction of a real estate project, an array of players need to be involved and working together. Planners, architects, investors, engineers, lawyers, project managers, and of course, clients are needed to ensure project success. With complex issues, high financial risk, and multiple parties come multiple opportunities for miscommunication and conflicting interests. Failure to build consensus with the development team from the outset can have serious negative impacts on key relationships throughout the development process, creating unnecessary delays and significant cost increases. Yet typically few, if any, of the development team are trained or highly skilled in consensus building. The “just-get-it-done” project manager may keep the team on schedule but may not help resolve the tensions, issues, and problems troubling the project. The “work-through-it-all” project manager may sacrifice efficiency to too much process, discussion, and unproductive and frustrating meetings. The architect, with a clear vision, may insist on that vision at the expense of other important considerations. The attorney may plan not just for contingencies but for too many of them.

BUILDING CONSENSUS WITHIN A TEAM

ESTABLISH A COOPERATIVE MIND-SET	SCOPE THE PROCESS	ESTABLISH A COMMON LANGUAGE	CREATE A ROAD MAP	BUILD AND REINFORCE BUY-IN
Articulate intention to use a cooperative approach	Identify team member's interests, issues, conflicts, and options	Establish a common project vocabulary	Develop and agree to core principals and ground rules	Build team ownership
Seek transparent communication from the client	Involve all key players from the onset	Take time to explicitly discuss communication protocols	Decide on roles, responsibilities, and approval process	Involve team in the process road map design
Reward project team for collaboration	Consider use of a communication professional	Model collaborative behavior	Provide clear rules for decision making	Monitor and evaluate progress early and ongoing
	Help to (re)frame and explain issues	Enforce communication protocols	Clarify implementation responsibilities	

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Key actions

In our experience, we've found five key actions help to bring the internal development team into alignment:

1. Establish a cooperative mindset.
2. Scope the process along with the project.
3. Establish a common language and commitment to communication.
4. Create a process road map.
5. Build and reinforce buy-in to the approach.

Establish a cooperative mindset.

If project team members are going to work cooperatively, they need to start off cooperatively. Individuals may either assume they are "all on the same team" or just accept unproductive conflict as part and parcel of doing business. Instead, the client, project manager, and other key members of the team must decide and articulate that a collaborative, cooperative approach is desired and will be supported.

Supporting this approach means project team members will be rewarded for solving problems together—not just advancing their own viewpoint—by receiving positive feedback at performance reviews and opportunities for professional promotions. It also means the client will seek to communicate as clearly and transparently as possible. Establishing a collaborative approach does not prevent conflict, rather it means that, when conflict does arise, it will be better managed and be turned to productive and constructive ends (e.g., clarifying issues, raising key differences or choices for resolution, forcing people to think through impasse to a better solution).

Scope the process along with the project.

It is, of course, quite common and desirable for projects to have clear schedules, milestones, and critical paths. However, it is much less common for the project team to scope the process through an assessment of the people and their interests, values, and challenges.

Once a team has decided to commit to a more cooperative approach, it should take the time to identify the interests of all team members, the value they bring, the key issues, the likely areas of conflict, and possible options for resolving such conflicts. It is also important for the various players to know how decisions are made within their respective organizations and what it takes to get approval. This is a time when it is essential to consider who might be left out of the process, intentionally or not. Is there someone higher up in the organization who may reverse decisions unexpectedly? If so, can the team proactively rather than reactively handle this possibility? Are there key tenants of the ultimate development who should be brought in early to provide useful advice?

Taking the time to consider all primary and secondary development team members will prevent omissions that could cause significant political or other substantive problems down the line. A communications professional experienced in real estate development projects can do this scoping. This individual can talk with the various members of the development team confidentially early in the process, scope the issues, share these issues with the team members, and then identify what actions or processes are needed going forward. The communications professional also can look at how the team frames and explains issues and help translate and reframe the more difficult issues.

Establish a common language. In the interest of avoiding unnecessary delays in the design and development phases, parties often assume they know what others are saying or feel they can't take the time to discuss how they'll talk with one another. However, the time taken at the outset to establish an easy-to-understand project vocabulary or language will ultimately avoid confusion and misunderstandings at more critical junctures of the project and in more public settings. In addition, the team can emphasize key communication skills by explicitly discussing communications protocol at the beginning of the project.

By modeling behavior, such as active listening and asking the right questions early in programming and planning, project managers can help ensure that the various parts of the team remain in alignment and avoid major course corrections later on. Further, team members need to be put on notice that behavior such as withholding information, refusing to answer questions, and rushing to meet deadlines without taking the time to ask questions and hold discussions will most likely cost time and money and is *not* acceptable.

Create a process road map. After the above steps are taken, the development team should be able to create a process road map. Such a map might include a set of principles, a commitment to cooperation, and a basic set of ground rules that emphasize clear communication. It might include details about roles, responsibilities, and approval processes. In addition, it should lay out clear rules for how decisions are made, who makes decisions, and how disputes will be handled.

It is important to clarify how the various tasks and phases in the development process will be handed off, ensuring smooth transitions between programming, initial design, final design, and other activities. This can all be done outside the formal, contractual arrangements between the client and team members (in alignment with formal contracts, of course). The process road map, which will supplement the schedule and necessary Gant charts, will clarify the way the team, in existence for only a limited time, will interact and perform.

Build and reinforce buy-in. All of the above efforts will be for naught if the team members do not buy into the team approach. The project manager and communications professional play an important role in helping the team build ownership in this kind of process by involving the team in the development of the process road map through workshops, team meetings, and/or team retreats.

Evaluating how they have done, what they have learned, and how they can improve their performance (and their process, as needed) in the time remaining is essential not only at the

beginning, or early in the process, but also mid-course. As the team moves from the planning phase to the more public phases, the ability to function effectively and efficiently as a team will help avoid project delays caused by internal disagreements, failure to communicate, miscommunication, or other process issues. With external forces often working diligently to oppose a project, the internal team can ill afford to work against itself and be one of the causes of costly delays.

Next issue: Building consensus during the pre-permitting stage.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Heather C. Conover is the founder and CEO of Westborough, MA-based Conover + Company Communications, Inc. (www.conoverandcompany.com); **Paula Green** is a vice president.



The firm specializes in community relations, real estate and facility siting projects, energy and environmental communications, and corporate responsibility programs. They can be reached at 866.411.7321.



Author of *Dealing with an Angry Public*, **Patrick Field** is managing director and **Stacie Nicole Smith**



is a senior associate of the Consensus Building Institute Inc. (www.cbuilding.org), a Cambridge, MA-based non-profit dedicated to improving the way people negotiate, with a focus on improving the art and science of consensus building in land use, development, and other multi-sector disputes. They can be reached at 617.492.1414.