

Social Facilitation and stakeholder engagement on construction projects

Recently a local sub-contractor arrived on a construction site, changed a padlock on the entrance gate and parked his car in front of the gate demanding payment for the services rendered from the main contractor without realising that he needed to send an invoice for his payment to be processed. The Social Facilitator was called to urgently address this situation.

Another recent case involved a local leader coming to the construction site and instructing that work must stop until all his issues were resolved. Stopping a contractor from working can add significant costs to the project. These costs are then passed onto the funder which could be the private sector or a municipality and its ratepayers. Again, the Social Facilitator needs to resolve this serious situation.

Multi-layered involvement of stakeholders on projects makes social facilitation an indispensable element of project implementation. Project stakeholders, who invariably have a diversity of interests, either maintain a passive (watching) interest on a project or are actively involved. Ignoring the existence of inherent dynamics in a project environment comes at a huge financial cost.

The role of a project social facilitator is managing stakeholder engagements at all project levels, preferably from the design phase through to project completion. This entails identification of all stakeholders whose interest / influence would have an impact on successful project implementation.

Social facilitation is not an exact science. The strategies and communication tools utilised to address challenges that arise are determined by the nature of the specific project environment and the individual players involved. The personality, character and experience of the individual tasked with managing the stakeholder engagement process cannot be over emphasized. A social facilitator must be able to build trust relationships with all stakeholders assess the project environment, advise the technical team on responses to social issues and lead the convergence of social issues with technical realities. This function needs to be maintained throughout the project cycle in order to minimise costly disruptions to the project.