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Stakeholder Engagement

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Why is stakeholder engagement important?

Developing a road safety campaign takes not only time and energy, but also different skill sets. Identifying natural partners who have different skill sets and share an interest in road safety can help make it easier to develop and implement an effective campaign. In every community the composition of stakeholders may vary. However, some of the potential partners to consider include City Councils and municipal/regional transportation departments, police, public health officers, automobile clubs, public transportation agencies, local businesses (e.g., delivery companies, real estate agents and others who spend time on the road) and advocacy organizations. Efforts to include stakeholders and individuals who represent all age ranges are also important to ensure the community is well-represented in terms of interests, perspectives, experiences and preferences.

How do I encourage stakeholders to participate in and support the development of a road safety campaign?

The first step to building effective partnerships with stakeholders is to understand their mission, goals, and activities to determine how road safety campaigns can complement and/or benefit their respective organizations. While organizations are often willing to contribute to social causes, these causes are numerous, and also 'in addition' to their day-to-day activities. As such, stakeholders can be more motivated by requests that include a benefit for their organization. These benefits may include increased visibility in the media, at events or in the community, more opportunities to engage directly with members of the public, official recognition or acknowledgement of their contribution, opportunities to connect with key audiences or opportunities to promote their products or services. In this regard, meeting individually with each stakeholder to learn about their organization and priorities can provide campaign organizers with information that can help them to create a more relevant and effective request for their cooperation, and gain much-needed buy-in.

At the same time, knowledge about the politics that influence each stakeholder and their ability to engage in certain tasks (e.g., fundraising, advocacy) or to work with others can help ensure that the roles and responsibilities of each partner are clearly defined and appropriate, and that expectations are consistent with these qualities.

What is the best way to allocate roles and responsibilities to each stakeholder to keep the workload for each organization manageable?

Taking a little bit of time to learn more about the day-to-day operational practices of stakeholders is a key to matching tasks with their natural abilities or the ease with which they can accomplish things. Recognizing the strengths of each stakeholder in terms of what they do well, and who may have access to relevant skill sets such as communications, marketing and design, fundraising, and influential partnerships can help to identify the best stakeholder(s) to undertake specific tasks. For example, businesses that routinely undertake marketing and promotion activities in relation to their business are well-positioned to participate in branding or creating promotional materials. Local government is well-positioned to make linkages to different sectors in the community and have experience working with media. Not only does the matching of skills to tasks make it more efficient for stakeholders to complete these tasks, but it also enables them to make an important contribution to the campaign that is in their 'comfort zone'. In other words, matching creates a sense of satisfaction that is valued and that keeps stakeholders engaged.

Another essential feature of assigning roles and responsibilities is to ensure the workload is spread fairly evenly across stakeholders and that just a few stakeholders are not responsible for the bulk of the work. This has two negative consequences. First it makes those doing the bulk of the work feel overwhelmed and even a little bit resentful when it comes to sharing credit for the campaign. Second, it makes those doing minimal work feel that their participation is unimportant and they are not included in decision-making, making it more likely that they will not remain engaged throughout the process.

How can stakeholders help the campaign reach its target audience and key influencers?

Understanding the membership of each stakeholder and their respective types of communication mechanisms and tools used for dissemination and outreach can provide important insight into opportunities to strengthen campaign penetration and reach. Some organizations may be very active on social media and have a membership comprised of business professionals; other organizations may have a lot of individual community members who meet regularly, and other organizations may have experience with using posters and brochures in schools. Figuring out what natural communication channels already exist among stakeholders and that can be leveraged is a good way to determine how to best and efficiently disseminate the campaign materials to different audiences using cost-effective strategies.

What should I do if stakeholders do not complete tasks that are assigned?

One way to help ensure that tasks are accomplished is to break down larger tasks into steps and keep stakeholders focused on immediate and next steps to avoid them feeling overwhelmed by challenging assignments. For example, the first step to develop a brand is to identify the key message; the first step to planning an evaluation is to determine who may have evaluation experience that can be tapped. Sometimes it is more manageable to focus on individual steps in a task as opposed to the whole task and getting started is often the hardest part.

Flexibility is also key to the completion of tasks. In a crunch, stakeholders are always going to place a priority on their core business and may be unable to complete certain tasks in the allotted time. For this reason, including at least two persons in task assignments can provide support for the task and help to ensure that if one person faces an unexpected challenge that at least one other person with knowledge of the task can either take over or at least keep things moving forward. Efforts to meet stakeholders halfway to help them manage schedules so they can complete assigned tasks are a necessary feature of negotiating the completion of work. This also demonstrates to stakeholders that you are willing to work with them to make things easier and helps to keep them engaged. Finally, it should be expected that some stakeholders will not be able to deliver on assigned tasks for a variety of reasons. Having a 'Plan B' for critical tasks can help minimize the negative consequences.

How do I keep stakeholders engaged throughout the entire process?

One important way to keep stakeholders engaged is to listen to their ideas, perspectives, and make the process inclusive so everyone has an opportunity to contribute to discussion. At the same time, it is important to make sure that discussions are not dominated by a few persons with strong opinions. One way to overcome this problem is to invite each individual during discussion to specifically comment on issues and share their thoughts if it appears some people are not participating. Most importantly, discussion of key issues at each meeting should include different options and alternatives that can be considered and decision-making should be consensus-based, although at times this may be more difficult to accomplish.

Keeping stakeholders engaged is also more easily achieved when committees have clear agendas and objectives to accomplish, and these objectives are efficiently accomplished at each meeting. Similarly, the assignment of responsibility for tasks and action items between meetings, as well as clear timelines are essential to ensure the work is completed. These are all important elements of meetings because partners are more likely to remain active throughout the process if progress is continuously achieved and goals are met. Stakeholders are more likely to disengage if meetings become repetitive and it appears that work is not being completed.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that partners are volunteering their time and resources to this activity, and efforts are also needed to accommodate schedules and competing demands. As such, making sure that timelines to complete tasks are reasonable, and that efforts to manage timelines to accommodate 'unforeseen' challenges are available, are necessary to avoid organizations feeling like they are not making a contribution.

Finally, and most importantly, regular and timely communication with stakeholders about work plans, timelines, obstacles and how they are being addressed, responsibilities and outcomes is essential to ensure ongoing interest in and support for the campaign. This emphasis can also help stakeholders to see where they have made key contributions that helped to deliver the final campaign and sustain their buy-in and continued partnership.

This document is part of the Community-Based Toolkit for Road Safety Campaigns.

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