Understanding Relationships as Critical Path for Project Delivery

Jeremiah Pariag

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HDR

Agenda

HDR

Introductions

Jeremiah Pariag
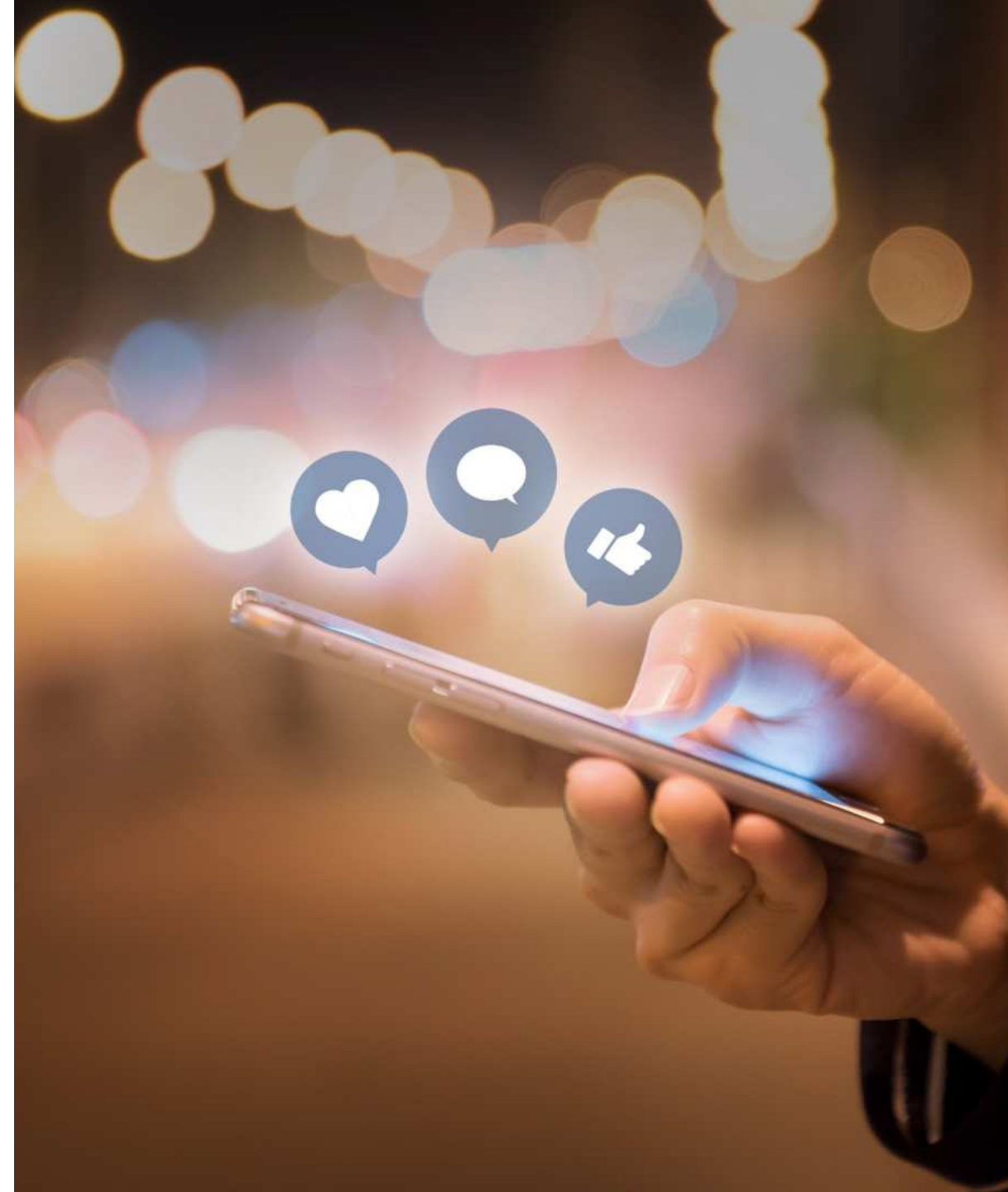*Consultation and Engagement Lead /
Indigenous Engagement Lead, HDR*

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Presentation Overview

Engagement is Changing

- Politicalization of projects is increasing.

- Social media and media consumption patters have changed.

- The perception of projects often matters more than the project itself.

- This leads to projects becoming more contentious.

- Engagement has evolved from a procedural step to a fundamental aspect of project success, influencing both acceptance and outcomes.

- **In a world where projects are more politicized, scrutinized, and contentious than ever, the strength of our relationships will determine our ability to build trust, gain buy-in, and achieve long-term success.**
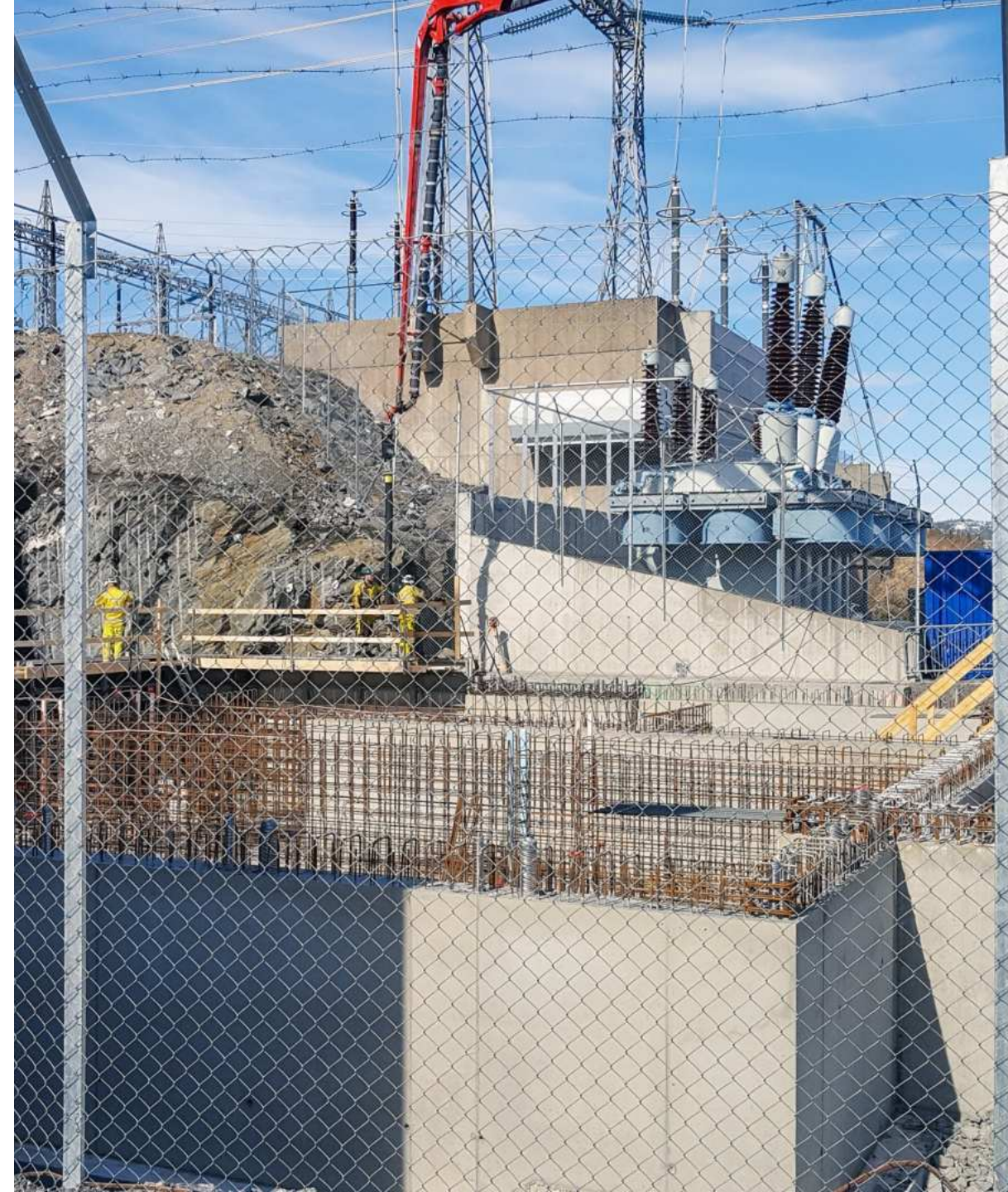
Critical Role of Engagement

- **Engagement** is the structured process of involving regulators, stakeholders, the public, Indigenous communities, and other key parties to provide meaningful engagement, gather input, and address concerns.

- **Pillars of Effective Engagement:**

  - Inclusivity: Ensuring all voices are heard, especially underrepresented groups like Indigenous communities.

  - Transparency: Openly sharing project details, timelines, and impacts to build credibility.

  - Consistency: Providing regular updates and maintaining dialogue throughout the project lifecycle.

  - Anticipation: Being able to understand issues that will arise in the future.

- **Outcome:** Projects that prioritize engagement are more likely to gain stakeholder support and reduce risks early.

Project Viability and Buy-In

- **A lack of proper engagement and buy-in impact the overall viability of a project.**

- **Direct Link to Success:** Active engagement ensures that stakeholder concerns are addressed, reducing opposition and increasing the likelihood of project approvals.

- **Building Community Support:** Projects that genuinely incorporate community feedback tend to face less resistance and generate long-term buy-in.

- **What We're Seeing:** Across the infrastructure sector, companies that integrate stakeholder feedback into project planning are experiencing smoother implementation processes and fewer delays.

The Politization of Projects

- **Political dynamics** can significantly impact project timelines, regulatory approvals, and funding, particularly in sectors like infrastructure and energy.

- **Public Opinion as a Driver:** The alignment (or misalignment) of projects with political agendas can drastically shift their direction or even lead to their cancellation.

- **Broader Industry Context:** The politicization trend is a reality across many sectors, making it crucial for practitioners to engage proactively with all stakeholders.

- **Need for Upfront Investment:** There is often a hesitation to spend the funds required to engage with the public robustly early on in projects; however, this can result in negative public opinion impacting projects.

Social Media

- Rise of Social Media: Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn have transformed how projects are perceived by amplifying both positive and negative narratives.

- **Impact on Projects:**

  - Real-Time Reactions: Stakeholders now react instantly to project developments, leading to rapid shifts in public opinion.

  - Viral Movements: Hashtags and online campaigns can quickly rally support or opposition against a project.

- **What We're Seeing:** Early engagement is a tool that can be used that can limit the impact of social media on projects..

Managing Misinformation

- Misinformation is becoming rampant on projects.

- Social media and conflicting traditional media reporting can paint projects in a negative light.

- **Impact on Projects:**

  - Project concerns are sometimes not rooted in reality.

  - Those who have concerns related to projects that are not rooted in reality are often difficult to communicate with using traditional means.

- **What We're Seeing:** The mere concept of some projects can be targeted by groups

Perception Management

- **The Power of Perception:**

    - Public perception can make or break a project, especially in today's fast-paced digital world.

    - Perception is very often more important than the reality of a project

- **Strategies for Shaping Positive Perception:**

    - **Proactive Storytelling:** Share stories that highlight the project's benefits and its alignment with community values.

    - **Addressing Misinformation:** Counter false information with clear, factual, and timely communication.

    - **Leveraging Community Leaders:** Collaborate with local leaders to reinforce positive messages and credibility.

What engagement techniques can be used to build relationships that improve project viability?

Trust the Experts

- Begin using specialized professionals:

    - So often, we rely on Planners to lead engagement for projects.

    - This works on my projects, but projects with heightened tensions will require engagement-focused practitioners.

- Internal Capacity Building

    - Training Teams: Focus on developing the skills required for effective engagement, including conflict resolution and relationship-building.

    - Resource Allocation: Ensure that there is adequate support and resources dedicated to the engagement process.

- **Benefit:** Investing in using specialists or building internal capacity helps organizations create more sustainable relationships with communities and stakeholders and the public.

Co-Creation

- Co-Creation involves actively engaging stakeholders as equal partners in the design, decision-making, and implementation processes of a project.

- **Approach:**

  - Early Involvement: Invite stakeholders to contribute ideas and perspectives from the project's inception.

  - Collaborative Decision-Making: Empower stakeholders to have a real influence on project outcomes through shared decision-making frameworks.

  - Empowerment: Provide the tools and resources needed for stakeholders to participate fully and confidently.

- **Benefit:** Co-creation fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability, leading to stronger support, innovative solutions, and more resilient project outcomes.

Media Monitoring

- Media Monitoring is the practice of systematically tracking and analyzing media coverage to understand public sentiment and manage the project's narrative.

- **Approach:**

  - Real-Time Tracking: Use tools to monitor social media, news outlets, blogs, and online discussions about the project.

  - Trend Analysis: Identify shifts in public opinion and emerging issues to refine messaging and engagement strategies.

  - Rapid Response: Quickly address misinformation or negative narratives to maintain control over the project's perception.

- **Benefit:**

  - Media monitoring enables proactive reputation management, allowing the proponent and project team to remain a trusted resource.

  - By addressing concerns quickly and transparently, media monitoring helps build and maintain trust with stakeholders, demonstrating a commitment to open communication and responsiveness to their needs.
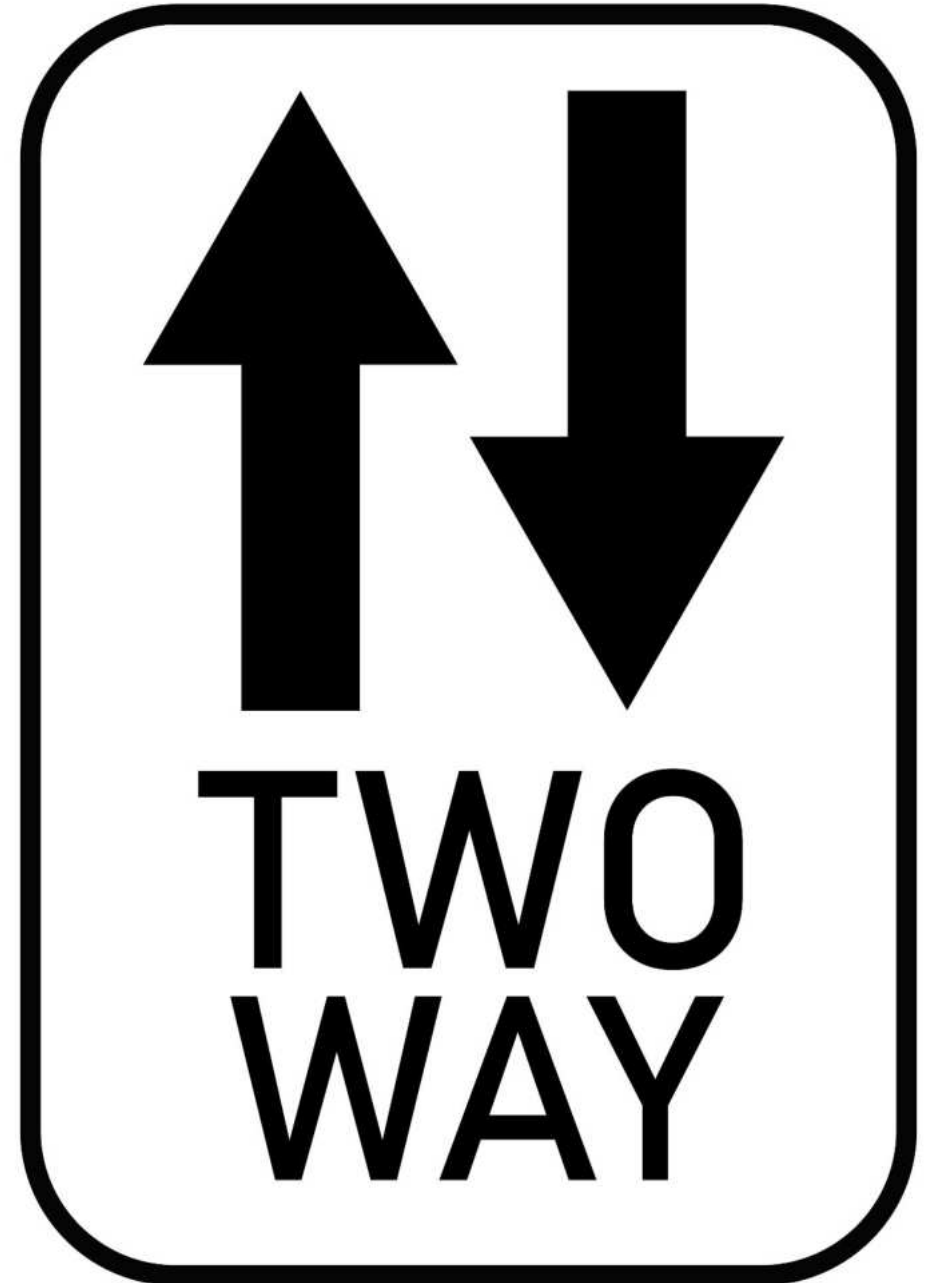
Storytelling

- Craft compelling narratives that resonate emotionally with stakeholders by focusing on shared values and human-centered stories.

- Provide an understanding for WHY projects are taking place and clearly show the positive outcomes of the project.

- **Approach:**

  - Highlight the personal impact of the project on individuals and communities, using relatable language and visuals.

  - Share success stories and testimonials from community members to create a positive narrative.

- **Benefit:**

  - Storytelling transforms controversial issues into relatable causes, aligning project goals with community values and reducing politization.

  - By connecting on an emotional level through stories, you build deeper trust and empathy with stakeholders, fostering genuine relationships and a shared sense of purpose that extends beyond the project itself.

Feedback Loops

- Establish continuous feedback mechanisms that allow stakeholders to voice their opinions and see how their input influences decisions.

- **Approach:**

  - Use online platforms, public meetings, or suggestion boxes to gather feedback regularly.

  - Clearly communicate how stakeholder feedback has been incorporated into project decisions to show genuine responsiveness.

- **Benefit:**

  - Transparency in feedback processes builds trust and reduces skepticism, showing that the project genuinely values stakeholder input.

  - By actively listening to and acting on feedback, you demonstrate respect and commitment to stakeholder concerns, strengthening the relationship and fostering a collaborative spirit that supports long-term engagement.

Grassroots Engagement

- Build support from the ground up by engaging local community groups, residents, and informal networks as active project advocates.

- **Approach:**

  - Identify and empower community champions to spread positive messages within their own networks.

  - Organize local events, workshops, or town hall meetings to directly engage with the community and address concerns.

- **Benefit:**

  - Grassroots engagement generates authentic, bottom-up support that is more resilient against political controversy and opposition.

  - By involving local champions and creating opportunities for direct interaction, you build deeper relationships and trust within the community, fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective ownership over the project's success.

Relationship-First Approach

- A Relationship-First Approach prioritizes long-term, trust-based relationships with stakeholders over transactional interactions, focusing on genuine connections and mutual respect.

- **Approach:**

  - Active Listening: Consistently listen to stakeholders' concerns, values, and aspirations to understand their perspectives deeply.

  - Continuous Engagement: Maintain regular, open communication beyond project milestones to build ongoing rapport.

  - Personal Touch: Invest time in face-to-face interactions, personalized outreach, and direct involvement with community leaders.

- **Benefit:** Establishing strong relationships from the beginning creates a foundation of trust that helps navigate challenges, reduces conflicts, and fosters long-term project support.

Key Takeaways

- In a world where projects are more politicized, scrutinized, and contentious than ever, the strength of our relationships will determine our ability to build trust, gain buy-in, and achieve long-term success.

- By using focused engagement techniques, you can improve your project's viability and outcome.

- Building trust-based relationships with all parties that you are engaging is essential for navigating the complexities of modern project delivery.

- Techniques like co-creation, grassroots engagement, and inclusive feedback loops are powerful tools to turn stakeholders into active partners.

- Addressing public perception through storytelling and media monitoring helps shape narratives and reduces the impact of misinformation and controversy.

- The ability to be proactive and responsive in engagement—by anticipating concerns, adapting to changes, and addressing issues swiftly—builds trust, enhances credibility, and drives stronger stakeholder collaboration.

- As the landscape of engagement evolves, stay agile and responsive to stakeholder needs, political shifts, and changing public sentiment.