

Public Involvement ... Design & Management

*“Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is a process.
Working together is success.”*

Henry Ford said it. I’m sure he’d been knocked around a bit before he learned it. Along the way, he changed the world.

Today he might add, “And don’t fool yourself, kid, none of this is easy. It takes hard work. It takes leadership. It takes communication.

Designing and managing a public involvement process is not much different. There is rarely a “buck stops here boss” at the helm, so it can be decidedly more complicated.

Seasoned communicators know that balancing political agendas and egos with corporate impatience and media curiosity are not for the inexperienced. Coming together, keeping together and working together is complex and hard.

There are five general steps to a process a community can follow. Strategic communications is required every step of the way.

➤ **Discovery:** This is the “coming together” phase. It is when consensus begins to emerge and the team begins to form. Participants begin defining, from their own perspectives, what’s wrong or what’s needed. External communications is critical to establish a positive first impression – to justify the time, energy and resources committed to the process. Internal

communications is needed to bring the team together.

➤ **Assessment:** Now is when data is gathered and analyzed. Subcommittees are formed. Leadership is essential. Timeframes are important. Work product is specific. This phase can be quiet externally, but internally, aggressive communication strengthens team relationships. This is vital because, in the next phase, participants begin to realize they may not be getting everything they wanted.



➤ **Design:** Real ideas start to surface. Tough choices emerge; some initial decisions are made. Opportunities and challenges become clear. Seats at the table get a little uncomfortable for some. Leaders must use all their skills to move the team from simply “keeping together” to “working together.” Communication, both internal and external, is key. Relationships formed early are tested. Detractors can become publicly critical.

➤ **Implementation:** The “working together” part starts for real. But, there’s no guarantee that what’s implemented is what was designed. Strong influences can alter the plan. Flexibility is required. Trust is the key. Otherwise, tough decisions can’t be made or won’t be accepted. Communicating at such times is critical. Trust is hard-earned and easily-lost. It cannot be taken for granted.

➤ **Operation:** Once operational, it’s all about “working together.” Public involvement efforts, just like Henry Ford’s manufacturing operations, must be managed, monitored and measured.

Designing and managing public involvement processes is dynamic and challenging. From “Discovery” to “Implementation” can take many months. Operational horizons are longer still. Success is often expected immediately, unless expectations are established early and reinforced throughout.

Strong leadership and aggressive communications are what make, “coming together, keeping together and working together,” work.

Vehr Communications, LLC: Reputations. Relationships. Results. That’s PR. That’s what Vehr Communications does. Firmly anchored in Cincinnati and with strong global connections, Vehr Communications provides strategic communications services to a broad range of private and public sector clients. To learn more, please visit www.vehrcommunications.com or call 513.381.8347.