Why A Community Engagement Framework Is Fundamental For Healthy Waterways

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Abstract
Melbourne Water is the caretaker of river health in the Greater Melbourne area and aims to improve the water quality in all rivers and creeks that flow into Port Phillip and Western Port Bays. The health of Melbourne’s waterways is closely linked to the communities’ level of awareness and participation. Traditionally Melbourne Water has focused on bank and riparian planting and consulted primarily with existing local environmental groups, landowners and local government on specific issues. A key area of engagement from Melbourne Water’s perspective is working with local government, and through local government with the general public.

Water sensitive urban design (WSUD) promotes the integration of the water cycle across the urban landscape using a distributed treatment approach to protect aquatic ecosystems (and therefore river health) and conserve water. The community is crucial to achieving these outcomes. The community are the beneficiaries of work to improve the environmental and social aspects of rivers and creeks. The community are also contributors to generating pollution and altering flow regimes.

This paper describes the Community Engagement Framework (the Framework) that is being developed and refined for Melbourne Water’s Stormwater Quality team in communicating and working with the community for improved waterway health.

Introduction
Water sensitive urban design projects have the potential to deliver both sound environmental outcomes and enhanced social outcomes. To achieve long term improvements in stormwater quality and river health requires communities that are capable of making informed decisions so that they contribute to, and in some instances drive, the uptake of WSUD.

This paper describes a community engagement framework underpinned by an evolving set of guiding principles that are directed at tackling and overcoming specific community issues associated with integrating WSUD into our neighborhoods.

The framework will be trialled, evaluated and refined as part of delivering WSUD projects under the Yarra River Action Plan’s $20 million stormwater improvement programs. This will enable:
- Better communication with communities on urban water cycle management issues;
- A more comprehensive and well informed approach to sustainable water management strategy that is locally relevant and in tune with the receptiveness of communities to WSUD;
- Improved relationships and stronger networks across the community on water management issues;
- A greater chance of gaining community ownership for WSUD projects undertaken in their local environment; and
- More opportunities for communities to be directly involved in protecting downstream environments and reducing demands on potable water supplies.
Why do we need a Community Engagement Framework
Social research commissioned by Melbourne Water (ResearchWise 2007) shows that water is a hot topic. Water quality is not a “top of mind” environmental issue although many believe it should be more prominent in their thoughts and actions. The research showed that there is a significant lack of awareness of what causes problems in waterways and what people can personally do to make a difference.

Reactions to previous on-ground works (e.g. rain gardens) suggest that the community, including local government and industry, will adopt positive steps if they can better understand the links between urban design, stormwater and waterway health (Lloyd, 2001; Lloyd et al., 2002; Edwards, 2006; ResearchWise, 2006; Armstrong et al., 2007). Some of the key challenges that arise with a WSUD project include:

- Cost of design, construction and maintenance;
- Site constraints (such as lack of space);
- Lack of understanding of maintenance requirements;
- Concern about the community’s acceptance/perceptions; and
- Aesthetic issues.

The implementation of WSUD often invokes a range of reactions depending on how a change will personally affect someone. The case study in this paper on WSUD street trees in Little Bourke St provided a range of responses including:

- “It’s a trip hazard”;
- “It’s a good little idea but I don’t think it’ll have a major impact on the waterways”;
- “I’m losing my car space – move it somewhere else”;
- “There is too much litter in there – it looks ugly”; and
- “I just work here – I’ve never noticed the trees outside”.

The community framework presented in this paper establishes clear objectives and provides a toolbox of tailored engagement techniques. This facilitates trust and helps build knowledge across the community linking water quality, stormwater management, protection of receiving waters, water conservation and urban design.

Definition of Community and Engagement
In order to develop a Community Engagement Framework it is important to define “community” and “engagement”. While the community is generally seen as the general public, i.e. people and groups outside government institutions and corporations, we would like to define community as “a group of people living together in one place” (Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, 2005). In the context of this work the “place” is the greater environment of Melbourne. We are all a part of the ‘community’ and are all on a journey of change in the way we interact with and value our environment. With change comes uncertainty and apprehension. We respond with a series of emotions ranging from what does all this mean through to how this will affect me on a day to day basis.

By including local governments and corporations as part of the community we are recognising that variations in awareness, knowledge, acceptance and collaboration occur with
these sections of the community and that we need to engage with them just as we engage with community groups.

Our working definition of engagement attempts to bring three spheres together: common understanding, participation and decision-making. The spectrum of participation from the International Association of Public Participation has also helped us to develop and refine our concept of engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the spectrum of participation.

![Figure 1 - Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2)](http://www.iap2.org/)

**Working with local government**

Melbourne Water has identified that local governments are crucial to the uptake of WSUD across Melbourne. Councils are the designated authorities for development and are at the coalface in terms of environmental management and providing community services. They are also responsible for significant capital works that offer major opportunities to incorporate WSUD principles.

Working with local governments also allows us to use feedback provided by the community to their elected representatives. By engaging with the council and raising awareness of river
health there is a greater chance that constituents will go to council staff and councillors to request more WSUD in their local area. It is also hoped that councillors will be more positive about WSUD projects.

**The Community Engagement Framework**

The Framework we are currently working with is illustrated in Figure 2. It shows that there are multiple “channels” between the Stormwater Quality Team at Melbourne Water and the community through which there are opportunities to engage. There is no assumption that a project that “empowers” is more effective than a project that “consults”. What is important is that there is some level of engagement, and that the concepts of common understanding, decision-making and participation are acknowledged throughout the project.

![Figure 2 - Melbourne Water’s Community Engagement Framework](image)

The Framework as described in Figure 2 alone is not enough to ensure that Melbourne Water is working with the community in the best possible manner. Other models and issues need to be included to support this Framework. They include a Concerns Based Model which is detailed below.

One of the challenges in adopting the Framework is providing everyone in the Stormwater Quality Team at Melbourne Water with the skills and confidence to work in this way. It is a different model to standard project management and traditional community consultation (especially where letter drops were the norm).

**Concerns Based Model**

Successful community engagement involves changing both attitudes and behaviours: a difficult task even when there is significant community goodwill. The change model we have used to underpin the design of a number of programs to do with community engagement in the water industry in Victoria, is known as the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall and Loucks, 1979).

Developed initially to help researchers understand how teachers respond to innovations in teaching methods, the CBAM has been developed into a powerful tool for analysing change efforts, particularly where there are a number of groups with very different, often conflicting, agendas involved in the effort.
The model proceeds from the assumptions that change is a process, not an event; that change is made by individuals, not organisations, and that successful change involves emotions and feelings as much as it does facts and logic.

The concerns-based model uses surveys and interview protocols to assess the nature of concerns people have about a change effort: e.g. how the individuals in a community group feel about a plan to change the environmental flows in a waterway. The model uses seven ‘stages of concern’ to identify the degree to which concerns (and, hence, opposition) are about:

- awareness and information issues – which can be dealt with through standard methods such as brochures, fliers, community meetings, briefings and press releases;
- personal issues – related to the impact of the change on ‘me and my world’. Personal concerns cannot be bypassed, they must be dealt with. They are the strong, individual concerns that relate to my sense of self and identity. It is here CBAM comes into its own as a methodology, for most change models ignore or downplay legitimate personal concerns with the excuse that they are too hard to deal with;
- management issues – which relate to the practicalities of change such as: What do we do differently? What new things do I have to learn? What are the new arrangements? and so on.

The CBAM approach means we can identify, in a very targeted way, what is bothering people and what we need to do in order to help them feel more comfortable. It also helps provide data on the length of time individual audiences need to move through the continuum of responses, from unawareness to proactive engagement with a new idea. It further allows the parties in the community engagement effort to make transparent their thinking and processes.

Applications of the Community Engagement Framework
The Framework in Figure 2 illustrates the variety of options that can be used to engage with the community. Some projects that were implemented in the past 18 months have attempted to use some of the approaches from the Framework.

Little Bourke St – engaging with businesses
City of Melbourne and Melbourne Water worked together on designing and implementing WSUD street trees into a highly built-up area of the CBD. The engagement process was added into this project after the design process had commenced but proved to be crucial in gauging the acceptance of the structural works and generating some real enthusiasm and ownership of the project over time.

This project centred on collaboration within Council and involvement with the business community. The specific aims were:

By November 2006 aim for 51% of traders in Little Bourke St to:
- Understand the value and significance of street trees in this precinct;
- Recognise the special nature of the trees; and
- Participate in litter prevention programs to help the protection of the trees.

This was achieved through 3 phases of face-to-face engagement to raise awareness, educate, and promote behaviour change with traders. The results indicated that 80% of traders said
they would alter their behaviour and 62% actually did. It is believed that this figure was very high due for the following reasons:

- we worked closely with the major stakeholder (the Hardware Precinct Association);
- personal relationships were developed with individual traders and businesses;
- we encouraged individual traders to adopt and care for the trees (one of the local champions is pictured below).
- there was a high concentration of camping and outdoor shops (who are generally very environmentally conscious); and
- we spent time listening to all of issues that were raised by traders rather than only those relating to stormwater.

In terms of the tools of engagement this project relied heavily on face-to-face discussions and consulting within the City of Melbourne. This project was very useful in understanding the combination of the Framework and the Concerns Based Model. Officers within Council were somewhat confused when the project first started but once they realised that they had some real power in shaping the project and its aims they moved ahead to collaborate and empower others within the organisation.

Figure 3 - Little Bourke St, Melbourne: local champion of the street trees

*Orchard Street Raingardens – engaging with the council*

This project was the first project for Stonnington Council and Melbourne Water with the Lower Yarra Stormwater Quality Program. The main objective for Melbourne Water was to develop the internal capacity of Council staff in WSUD through action learning and collaboration.

Three stakeholders were engaged during the design and construction of the project:
- Council staff;
- Residents; and
- The construction contractor.
Council staff were targeted through project team meetings where all relevant staff, Melbourne Water and the WSUD consultant could share ideas and discuss the needs and wants of each person in regards to the project. For example, the stormwater engineers needed assurance that the WSUD element would not adversely affect the surrounding infrastructure, the traffic engineers wanted no impediment to vehicular traffic and Melbourne Water wanted the involvement of relevant staff throughout the design and construction phase. The setting up of a multi-disciplinary team to discuss the needs and wants is important in project management and helps to bring about a successful project (Armstrong et al. 2007).

Community engagement was initially handled by way of a letterbox drop to the surrounding residents. Face to face engagement was then carried out with those residents who replied with negative comments regarding the concept design. Both a representative from Council and Melbourne Water attended a face-to-face meeting at the resident’s home. This was important not just for the resident, but also in showing council staff that face-to-face engagement can be done as a matter of course.

The last group to be engaged were the construction crew. This engagement informed the construction manager of the design intent by discussing the detailed designs and explaining how the WSUD elements worked.

When comparing the engagement options used with the three stakeholder groups with the framework, it can be seen that different types of engagement were used depending on the stakeholder - collaboration was the objective for Council staff, consultation for the community and informing for the construction crew. One of the lessons learnt from this project was the importance of the Concerns Based Model (the residents obviously had high personal concerns), and the need to look at engaging all stakeholders earlier in the process to allow more time for individuals to overcome their concerns and raise awareness of water quality issues.

Figure 4 - Orchard St, Malvern: engaging with the Construction team was very important for a successful project.
Conclusion
Melbourne Water has achieved a lot in the last ten years in pushing WSUD in its own projects and in partnership with others. The success of the projects detailed in this paper have helped refine and guide the Community Engagement Framework. It is particularly important to establish the appropriate level of decision making and dialogue between all stakeholders (especially local residents and businesses) at the beginning of a project rather than token consultation after all decisions have been made.

Melbourne Water is now keen to utilise a Community Engagement Framework to improve the acceptance and uptake of WSUD in local environments. The Yarra River Action plan provides more resources to implement WSUD across Melbourne. The Stormwater Quality Team at Melbourne Water will endeavor to include the principles of the Community Engagement Framework in undertaking and funding projects.

References
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