

# Community consultation is key to frustration in building sector

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The construction sector is in dire straits. Due to slow economic growth many construction companies are under immense pressure which includes retrenchments and possible business closure. In addition, the frustration is compounded by surrounding rural communities that often work for local construction companies.



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When a new project is earmarked for a rural community, many problems and expectations arise. This is largely due to a miscommunication between the community and the construction company. These communities continue to live in poverty with poor service deliveries leading to exasperation and frustration all round. So, what can be done to elevate the tension between surrounding communities and construction companies?

## Unscrupulous and unrealistic

The frustrations and expectations by the communities have, in some instances, led to construction projects being held ransom. Recently, Aveng-Strasbag, in conjunction with SA and Belgian engineering firms, had to stop work on its R1.6bn contract to build a massive bridge over the Mtentu River. They cited excessive demands by the community as the reason for choosing to cut their losses. In another instance, a construction site was closed due to the fact that the workers hired from the community wanted bonuses simply for attending work.

Often the demands from the community may be seen as unrealistic when viewed by the construction company. Representatives from the community may have their own power plays and would like to show the rest of the

community and the construction company how important they are by calling for community protests.

## Can this community behaviour be avoided?

These demands may be avoided by construction companies being proactive on how issues are initially communicated between themselves and community leaders. On a broader scale, these issues are part of larger problems within the impoverished rural areas in South Africa. However, the construction industry is unique in that there is a beginning and an end date to the project. Yet this is not often communicated to the members of the community or they simply refuse to understand this concept, i.e. community members remain firm that they should be employed on a permanent basis, even though it is a construction project.

## Research, mediating and consulting are essential

The construction industry can greatly benefit from surrounding communities but there needs to be a balance when it comes to employing people from the local area versus employing outside people with the right expertise. When working within a community it is important to approach a consultation company which acts as a facilitator and intermediary between the construction company and the community. This intermediary looks at all points of view from community issues to the construction project. This same intermediary can help advise the construction project on how to avoid potential pitfalls and protests for example. The consultancy will research similar big companies that have previously been involved in that

community, and highlight 'red flags' and how the community reacted - positively or negatively - by decisions made by the company. The consultation company also advises on the strategy to follow to mitigate risk. Furthermore, understanding the community dynamics before breaking ground is essential to a successful construction project, particularly in rural South Africa.

It is recommended that perhaps one of the best avenues, prior to commencing with the project, is that the company conducts skills assessment tests. Members of the community who have building skills, but do not have the paperwork, or perhaps have a letter from their previous employer, could still be part of the project due to their vast experience. This is not to say the construction company should put the project at risk. However, there is an advantage to recognising previous experience and thereby including members of the community.

## **Leaving a legacy**

In terms of upskilling, the construction company is not required to upskill locals. However, if the business embraces good corporate governance in their corporate policy, then the question arises – what is the legacy you would like to leave behind? Part of positive brand building and leaving a long-term legacy is achieved with upskilling programmes where community members are able to work on the next project, thereby making the projects more sustainable for the community.

Upskilling may also assist with unreasonable demands from the community. If a company is proactive in leaving a positive legacy and it spends money on upskilling, then there is less chance for people to follow disruptive elements within the community.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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