

Effective community engagement is vital for CSI success

As part of its ongoing drive to create dialogue and facilitate knowledge transfer within the corporate social investment and responsibility sphere, Kaelo Engage hosted a breakfast dialogue at the Johannesburg Country Club in Woodmead to discuss the need to engage communities in CSI activities.



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Reportedly, the most common mistake made by many companies and institutions engaged in CSI activities, is not listening and engaging with communities properly. There is a need to talk to people, not at them, in order to understand their needs. This pitfall often results in CSI spend being channelled into projects that do not yield intended positive social outcomes.

Led by KPMG's senior advisor in the climate change and sustainability team, Sarah Ball, her discussion revolved around the power of community engagement when it comes to the success or failure of an initiative and how best to harness this latent potential to focus the right solutions at the right problems.

Identify and engage

Kusile Mtunzi-Hairwadzi, Head of the MTN SA Foundation noted that companies first need to identify and engage with relevant communities and align CSI programmes to their core business. "By sticking to your strengths you most certainly build brand equity while minimising risk. This goes a long way to becoming a good corporate citizen.

"When entering a community, it is vital to understand the challenges on the ground. There is a considerable difference between what we perceive to be the problem and the reality. This is done by engaging the community, and speaking to the beneficiaries. We find that by talking to the people on the ground, we can get to the root of the issue and make sure we are adding real value to those who need it most. One has to put measures in place to evaluate your successes and failures, and learn from them to ensure one will be able to be more effective with the resources at hand."

Charlene Lackay, Head of External Communications and CSI at Momentum adds that an often-overlooked secret to success is strategic partnerships. "Some of the greatest successes we have seen are when people come together as partners. These partnerships should also be business-neutral, with the success of the project being the driving force. Choose a partner that can increase your chances for success, even if it may be a competitor.

Not short-term commitments

"Additionally, we must remember that CSI projects are not short-term commitments. You have to get to know your beneficiaries, their communities and challenges intimately. The longer you are involved with them, the better you are able to help. Essentially, we are trying to change behaviour, educate and uplift and this cannot be achieved through once off interventions. You need to follow up all initiatives with support activities there is ensure that there is continuity and sustainability."

Sarah Campbell, MD at Kaelo Engage shared some insight gleaned through a social mobilisation project done in the Limpopo Province, where community engagement was critical in ensuring success. "A key lesson from the social mobilisation project was how important it is to know your environment. Understand what assets are available to you and what challenges you will face. The best place to gather this information is getting out into the community and learning, first-hand, from the community stakeholders. A good port of call in rural communities is usually local chiefs, spiritual leaders and community leaders.

"Once you have defined the specific challenges and viable solutions, the next hurdle is communication. This too can pose problems, as traditional channels may not be available in rural areas or not have the same affect as in urban areas. Particularly effective, in rural areas, is the use of radio. To supplement this it is worthwhile approaching faith-based organisations, attend community Imbizos, utilise local NGOs and get people to go door-to-door.

"A successful initiative must be all-inclusive. Collaborate with local influencers who could talk to the local community with authority and bring local insight to your strategy. This local insight is vital when tailoring your message to different audiences. Information that you disseminate needs to speak to the audience - for example, a faith healer would need different information from a government official."

Six points to ponder

1. Understand the community you serve. Your perception of their challenges may not be the same as theirs
2. Stick to your strengths. When you use your core competencies, success is far more likely
3. Partner with someone who will ensure the success of your project
4. Community engagement is a long-term commitment. Make your efforts continuous and sustainable
5. Use the right communication channels
6. Tailor your message to the audience

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