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Between a Rock and a Hard Place:
Community Relations Work in the Minerals Industry

Dr. Deanna Kemp

Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining
University of Queensland, Australia

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csrn@uq.edu.au
www.csrm.uq.edu.au
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the findings of a study designed to capture the practitioner perspective on community relations practice in the minerals industry and to relate it to broader debates about social sustainability within the industry. The study, which was conducted using participant observation and in-depth ‘active’ interviews as the main research techniques, focused on the work of community relations practitioners based at seven minerals operations in Australia and New Zealand.

The research findings demonstrate that community relations work is complex, contradictory and full of tension and dilemma. The study identified 18 key practice tensions and found that practitioners were most effective when they managed to keep both sides of the tensions in play. The framework developed around the practice tensions provides a useful reference point for practitioners, organisations and their managers for reflecting on community relations practice to ensure that tensions are being adequately balanced and that the work is not becoming one-sided.

The ability to maintain a balance between these tensions is referred to as ambidexterity. A key enabler of successful community relations was the ability of organisations as well as individual practitioners to demonstrate ambidexterity.

An important conclusion from this research is that the development of community relations professionals would be enhanced if the industry moved away from the conventional approach to ‘professionalisation’. Instead of demarcating professional boundaries and developing exclusive knowledge, community relations practitioners should be encouraged to develop knowledge and skills in other professional areas, as well as in their own area of specialisation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Leading minerals companies have come to understand that, whatever their legal position in relation to a resource, operations are unlikely to be viable over the long term unless they retain the support of local communities. Increasingly, engagement, dialogue and participation with local communities and other stakeholders are seen as key mechanisms for achieving and maintaining this ‘social licence’ to operate. The traditional public relations model has given way to a strategic approach, which emphasises the need for more active and reciprocal relations between companies and communities. Community relations is now a key organisational function and emerging occupational specialty at many minerals operations around the world.

While the minerals industry has been at the forefront of changes in company-community relationships, there is still a need for clearer conceptions of the process of community relations practice. Understanding operational-level issues is particularly important, given that moving from policy to practice is one of the industry’s toughest challenges.
There are several standpoints from which to view community relations work. One important but often overlooked perspective is that of people employed in this role at the operational level. This paper outlines the key findings of a study that aimed to capture the practitioner perspective and relate it to broader debates about social sustainability in the minerals industry. The study formed the basis of a PhD thesis undertaken at The University of Queensland¹.

After outlining the methodology used, key findings are articulated, including a framework of practice tensions, and then implications for the professional development of community relations practitioners are discussed.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Method

The research plan for the study was a multi-case design involving seven specialist site-based community relations practitioners and their work environments. Data were gathered during intensive one-week site visits in Australia and New Zealand via the ethnographic methods of participant observation and in-depth active interviewing. The seven workers were ‘shadowed’ in their workplaces for one week each to gather data. This involved engaging in conversations and discussions with each practitioner about their work and observing them in the workplace, including during community interactions and internal meetings.

The seven host sites, or operations, had each made significant policy commitments to sustainable development, social sustainability and community relations and were owned (partially or wholly) by global mining companies. Other brief details of the case study sites are provided in Table 1:

Table 1: Overview of Case Study Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Aspects</th>
<th>Case Study Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commodity group</td>
<td>Four commodity groups: gold, aluminium, iron ore and mineral sands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity to town</td>
<td>Two sites in close proximity to a city or town, three regional sites and two remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of facility</td>
<td>Five sites open cut and two production facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner Aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Four female and three male practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential status</td>
<td>Two commuters and five resident practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Six practitioners based on-site and one in a Visitor’s Centre next to the facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment arrangements</td>
<td>All practitioners were full-time salaried staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community relations responsibilities</td>
<td>All practitioners worked exclusively in community relations in a variety of areas, including: Indigenous affairs, community engagement, sponsorship and donations, social research and cultural heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Practitioners had a variety of educational backgrounds – three with degrees in science and/or communication, two with a technical trade, and two others with no formal tertiary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical position</td>
<td>Five practitioners were management team members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Analysis

The Nvivo™ qualitative software program plus some manual coding was used for qualitative analysis. Key findings emerged inductively from the data through thematic analysis.

3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Conceptual Framework of Practice Tensions

Community relations work is a practice full of tension and dilemma, always complex and sometimes even contradictory. Practice tensions were indicated where a relationship between two factors appeared contradictory, inconsistent, conflicting just somewhat at odds with each other. Such instances were apparent when practitioners were ‘stretched’ or pulled in different directions in the course of their work. These interplays were both observable in practice and/or articulated in direct discussion with practitioners while in the field.

A total of 18 key practice tensions were identified in the study and have been organised into six categories (Table 2). The categories offer a logical explanatory structure rather than being absolute, as no such categorical neatness exists in practice. Arguments could be mounted that any one of the tensions belongs in another category, or that there is overlap. The approach was to place tensions in the category of ‘best fit’. The following paragraphs explain the key elements of each tension.

Table 2: Community Relations Practice Tensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Space</th>
<th></th>
<th>Position</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal-External</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integral-Peripheral</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Culture-Capital</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Local-Global</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Basis (for Interaction)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict-Consensus</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical-Relational</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual-Collective</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional-Rational</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Powerless-Powerful</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mode</td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal-Professional</td>
<td></td>
<td>Process-Outcome</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal-Formal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leading-Supporting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Open-Closed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Planning-Responding</td>
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<td>Defined-Unclear</td>
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<td>Immediate-Future</td>
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<td>Understanding-Action</td>
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</tbody>
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3.1.1 Space

Community relations requires practitioners to switch perspectives within and across dual spaces, including between: internal and external spaces, spaces of (traditional) culture and capital, and local and global spaces.
• **Internal and External Spaces**

In a physical sense, practitioners accessed both internal and external spaces to perform their work as they moved from inside the boundary of the mine to the external realm of the community. Beyond the physical, practitioners needed an ability to ‘see’ and have empathy for both the company (internal) and community (external) perspective. This ability to switch between perspectives was integral to the role, although some practitioners were more skilled at this than others. Practitioners not only had to see both perspectives themselves, but also sometimes had to represent one to the other; for example, they sought community feedback on company policy positions, advocated on behalf of the community in management meetings and/or represented the company in public forums.

The notion of practitioners being caught in the middle between the internal and external perspective was pervasive. Practitioners described working across and between internal and external spaces with words such as: “liaising”, “bridging”, “facilitating”, “connecting” and as a “conduit” or a “middle man” (sic) between the organisation and the community. While practitioners indicated that they worked to balance the internal and external perspectives, it did appear that on balance, the internal perspective had priority.

• **Traditional Culture and Capital**

All practitioners considered Aboriginal or Indigenous affairs to be a specialist area within the community affairs discipline. In this specialisation, practitioners worked from spaces of capital (that is, a Western commercial perspective) as well as spaces of traditional culture. All practitioners in the study interfaced with Indigenous communities and one focused almost exclusively on this aspect. None of the practitioners were Indigenous themselves, but they were aware of mining-related issues from a cultural perspective and conversely, Indigenous-related issues from a commercial perspective. Practitioners often acted as the primary point of contact between the site and Indigenous people, although this role was not always easy, as outlined by the example below:

One of the practitioners explained his frustration about how other managers were treating one of the Aboriginal Affairs Officers at the site. The practitioner said about his colleague:

“He has a massive workload. He has to deal with crap day-in-day out … black and white issues … really heavy social stuff. He also has to go to management meetings, supervise staff and do things the way other managers think things should be done … and because he’s not “available” other managers say that he’s “unreliable” because he’s hard to catch, because he doesn’t return e-mails and communicate through “the management system” like they do.

The practitioner was frustrated that he and his colleague were judged on their use of the system like all the other technical managers. He felt there was limited flexibility in terms of how the management system dealt with the different
issues and dynamics faced by community relations practitioners, particularly those working in Indigenous affairs.

Tensions between culture and capital were most obvious when matters of land access, cultural heritage and/or Indigenous employment were involved. Community relations practitioners were only able to provide a bridge across some dimensions of Indigenous affairs as some issues were beyond the sphere of influence of a single practitioner. At times their role was simply that of a conduit rather than an influencer. At other times their role was central to facilitating good relationships.

- **Local and Global**

Community relations work is inherently grounded in the local space, including knowledge of people and places. It is the practitioner’s local knowledge of the particular, rather than the general, that makes them valuable to their operation. However, practitioners also need to grasp the global context, for example around sustainable development and human rights, in order to understand company expectations. Practitioners indicated that an ability to see the “big picture” while operating at a micro level was essential.

Working local to global was also required in order to foster internal relationships with people in corporate and/or regional offices, although strong local-global relationships were not the norm. There were several instances where actions by corporate and/or regional offices undermined the work of practitioners because local implications of corporate actions were not fully understood.

3.1.2 Basis for Interaction

Another inherent tension of community relations work is the need to operate both from a basis of conflict and consensus, and to engage in individual and collective interaction.

- **Conflict and Consensus**

Within the external space, practitioners were often the first point of contact for stakeholders when issues arose. Whether the issue was dust, noise, traffic, visual impact, employment or cultural heritage, the basis of interaction was often grounded in conflict, grievance and disagreement. While the goal was to move towards consensus and mitigate or ‘solve’ issues, practitioners indicated that dealing with conflict was part of the job. If practitioners shied away from conflict they risked losing the opportunity upon which to build relationships.

Internally, practitioners were expected to demonstrate an overt consensus orientation. It was clear that some operational managers were not comfortable when community relations practitioners brought external concerns and issues to the table in management meetings. Underlying conflicts between organisational personnel were often addressed privately out of session, rather than during open meetings. Practitioners had to adapt to operating from a basis of consensus in the internal realm and conflict in the external. The example below demonstrates the type of consensus observed at most sites:
The Senior Management Team at one of the sites attended daily, weekly, monthly and annual management meetings. The meeting observed was a weekly meeting. The ten managers, nine of who were men, entered the meeting room and engaged in collegial and friendly small talk while others arrived. They placed themselves randomly around a large meeting table. It was 10am, and everyone seemed eager to get the meeting over and done with and get back to work. The agenda was pre-set according to a standard pro-forma and projected onto the wall for everyone to follow. The GM chaired the meeting. Managers took turns to speak about what had happened during the week, including achievements, issues and incidents. Each manager spoke for about three minutes. Community relations was the final agenda item. No one was interrupted or challenged as they spoke. The meeting was controlled and standard. This format was typical of the management forums observed at other times of the week at this site, and subsequently other sites.

- **Individual and Collective**

Every practitioner was located in a department with ‘Community Relations’ in the title. One practitioner was the department and worked individually as a specialist practitioner for the site. Three others were the only community relations practitioners in their department, so in a sense also worked alone. These practitioners all shared feelings of professional isolation in terms of not being able to share ideas and experiences with workplace colleagues in a similar field. At the same time, all practitioners dealt with collectives in the sense of working with other departments, and also in the external realm, with community groups and other organisations.

The most interesting angle on the tension between the individual and collective relates to the differentiation between public relations/external affairs and community relations. Without exception, every practitioner made a distinction between these two areas of practice, but emphasised there was a degree of overlap and no clear point of separation. The two areas were considered both complementary and competing.

Practitioners considered community relations to be based primarily on relationships, where knowledge of individuals was key, and where the information flow was primarily from external stakeholders to the company. While practitioners used collective metaphors in talking of “the community” in their day-to-day work, they emphasised individuals when they articulated their conceptualisation of community relations. Public relations/external affairs on the other hand was considered to be based more on pre-determined, generic messages directed more broadly to the collective public where the flow of information was primarily from the internal realm outwards through technological means or a third party, such as the media.

While community relations practitioners sought to differentiate their work from public relations/external affairs, they did not achieve that all of the time. Practitioners still spent time developing generic messages and communications strategies, rather than on undertaking personalised communications. There was ambiguity regarding the intersection between community relations and public affairs.
3.1.3 Mode

Community relations practitioners work in personal and professional modes, formal and informal modes and also in both open and closed modes.

- **Personal and Professional**

The tension between working personally and professionally was complex. While practitioners thought and acted in both personal and professional modes, the two were inseparable in the context of community relations work. Without personal relationships, practitioners would have been limited in their ability to understand different perspectives and build relationships. Without an organisational mandate, they would not have had a professional role to play. Clearly, some practitioners had better personal links, or ability to foster personal links, than others and used those links in the course of their work.

For the five practitioners residing locally, the community in which they lived was also the ground upon which their professional life was based. Their personal and professional lives often became conflated, and it was sometimes difficult to determine whether they were in personal or professional mode, particularly after hours. All practitioners experienced intrusion into their personal lives, although less so for the two practitioners commuting to and from their workplace. Most practitioners had developed strategies to separate personal from professional aspects in order to cope with this tension.

All practitioners indicated that their organisation did not fully recognise the value of their personal knowledge and relationships with people in the community. Several felt that other personnel took the personal dimensions of their work for granted and did not perceive community relations work as ‘professional’.

- **Formal and Informal**

All practitioners indicated that their organisations tended to undervalue informal modes of working, whereas they considered this aspect as central to maintaining personal relationships. Practitioners indicated that personal relationships were most easily sustained when interaction was relaxed, casual and unstructured. They emphasised that formal agreements did not sustain relationships. Practitioners relied heavily on informal moments to build personal rapport not only with community people, but also with other employees and managers.

Although informal modes of working were seen as essential, some formalisation had helped practitioners. For example, voluntary regulation such as industry codes, corporate policies and standards had elevated the importance of community relations at a site level and validated the role of practitioners.

Practitioners did not disagree with formalisation in principle, but they often found it difficult in practice. For example, the community often complained ‘off the record’, or verbally, and avoided putting complaints in writing unless issues had escalated. Practitioners found
themselves caught between the requirement to create records and document complaints, and an informal complaint processes within the community. If practitioners over-emphasised the formal, they would be unable to respond to all of the cumulative and informal, yet extremely valuable, feedback that the organisation received through informal complaints.

- **Open and Closed**

Policy ideals at each site reflected an aspiration towards open consultation and transparent dialogue both internally and externally in order to build trust with stakeholders. Practitioners were often more willing than others at their operation to be open and transparent in their communications.

3.1.4 Organisational Position

Aspects of organisational position involved some of the most complex data of the study. There were many angles when considering whether the community relations function was integral or peripheral to organisational structures, processes and culture.

- **Integral or Peripheral**

In general, site policies and systems aimed to move community relations from a peripheral position to a more integral role. A word that was frequently used was “embedded”, but on balance, this appeared to be more an aspirational goal than a reflection of actual practice. Community relations work is dependent on having a strong internal position, and vice versa. The one operation that had its community relations office located outside the boundary of the site had strong links into the community; however practitioners paid a price in terms of being separated from the mainstream of the organisation, particularly in terms of access to information.

Five of the seven practitioners involved in the study were management team members, so many meetings were observed during the field research. Time and time again, community relations considerations were covered towards or at the end of the management meetings, when time was short and managers seemed to be looking at their watches. Practitioners often had to race against the clock, forced to make their point as attention was waning. Again, while the community relations function was formally recognised at the management level, it was at the same time a somewhat peripheral consideration.

Several practitioners explained that they were constantly pushing their way into decision-making processes within the business rather than being pulled. There were instances where capital approval processes did not have tick box options for community relations, accounting processes did not enable flexible arrangements for compensation payments, categories used in standard documentation did not reflect community relations terminology or timelines, contract clauses did not account for dealing with local small businesses – and the list goes on. The position of community relations was more integral when legal or regulatory requirements for consultation and engagement applied, or when there was a manager with authority who
recognised the importance of community relations and mandated the involvement of practitioners.

In several cases, building community relations into dominant processes, procedures, systems and language helped achieve some level of integration with the mainstream of the business. For example, risk assessment and the use of community relations management systems provided avenues to raise the profile of community relations at the operational level and ensure it is an automatic consideration in business processes. However, community relations practitioners tended to struggle with the ‘language’ of the dominant management systems approach, as the example below serves to demonstrate:

During the research, an interview was observed between one of the practitioners, her manager and an environmental auditor who assessing the site against the ISO 14001 environmental standard. Parts of the audit were relevant to community relations, so the practitioner and her manager had to participate. They had not been involved in previous audits. The auditor asked specific questions, which they answered as best they could. However, the language used by the auditor became more problematic as the interview proceeded. For example, the auditor asked them about “document control”. The practitioner and her manager were not clear about the question or the concept of document control. It transpired that the community relations department was fulfilling the requirements of the standard, but they did not use this terminology. The auditor also asked about the “corrective action system” used by community relations. This terminology also had to be explained as community relations referred to this as “complaints management”. The auditor also asked them about “incidents” which the department referred to as “complaints” or “issues”. The manager said afterwards that he was still getting his head around management systems terminology. He said it had not traditionally been part of the way community relations had been managed.

3.1.5 Perspective

This section explores various aspects of working across the tensions between the technical and relational, emotional and rational and between the powerful and powerless.

- Technical and Relational

The tension between technical and relational aspects of community work was observed by watching and listening to practitioners deal with people and their, at times unpredictable, emotions on the one hand, and on the other hand the science of mining where technology was used in predictable ways to achieve the practical end of mining. Without exception, both technical and relational skills were required in community relations work.

An extension of the technical-relational tension involves the use of qualitative and quantitative data. Within each organisational setting, other managers sought quantitative data when making decisions and judging performance, as it was considered more reliable and objective. Several practitioners were frustrated that community relations work was light on
data compared to other functions. However, none of the practitioners involved in the study used qualitative analysis software, for example NVivo™, to present their data. Instead they tended to analyse data trends intuitively rather than systematically.

Several practitioners perceived Indigenous Affairs to have a slight advantage in terms of providing hard evidence archaeological evidence that could at least produce ‘things’ by way of artefacts.

• **Emotional and Rational**

Some people in communities visited during the field research were emotionally upset about the presence of the operation and its associated activities. While community relations practitioners dealt with high levels of emotion in the external world, in the internal organisational environment, emotion was less readily displayed. Practitioners were expected to rationalise and strategise in relation to community outrage, and control their emotions. Several practitioners indicated that they deliberately talked to other managers in a measured and professional manner then “flicked a switch” out in the community in order to “tune in” to people’s feelings and perceptions. This ability to understand the rational side of issues as well as the emotional was pivotal to being an effective community relations practitioner.

There was also a gender perspective to community relations work. All four female practitioners said it was a challenge working in a male-dominated industry. They were each made to feel aware of their gender in various ways. One practitioner explained that she had learned to engage in the “blokey stuff” in order to be afforded entry into management team conversations outside the formal agenda. I observed all of the women engaging in this behaviour.

Practitioners were observed to shift between what some practitioners termed the ‘male’ and ‘female’ (or ‘soft’) perspective. In the external realm, it appeared that practitioners came from a soft perspective in order to empathise with community members regarding impacts of the operation. This was in contrast to the more hard-nosed achievement orientation of the male-dominated working environment where emotion was often suppressed. Practitioners were observed to utilise both perspectives as a means of exercising influence in the various spaces in which they worked. While academic literature continues to debate whether there are male and female ways of knowing, the four female practitioners and two of the males considered it a disadvantage that minerals operations are not more accommodating of female perspectives.

• **Powerful and Powerless**

Although some literature on development and globalisation paints an image of corporations as ‘all powerful’, practitioners in the current study considered the community to be as powerful a force as the company. Several practitioners expressed frustration that the community in their location did not recognise the full extent of its power, suggesting that a vocal community gave them a reason to raise concerns in management team meetings and a platform from which to advocate for issues to be addressed. If the community remained silent, practitioners found it more difficult to push for change internally.
Several practitioners perceived their organisation as miserly when it came to using power for the benefit of the community. They were frustrated that their company would not apply pressure to governments, for example, to upgrade health and education or services in their area, and would only apply pressure when their own interests were at stake.

Practitioners’ ability to influence was also manifest in contradiction, as they were able to influence in some contexts and not others. For example, one practitioner had the authority to shut the pit if noise levels became problematic. This was not only based on scientific measurements of allowable limits, but also her subjective judgement. The practitioner did not invoke this power during the field research, but records showed that she had shut down operations three times during the six months prior. Despite this, she was perceived by the local Indigenous community to be powerless when it came to influencing management over matters of cultural heritage.

Practitioners were sensitive to power relations both in the internal and external space. None of the practitioners had well-established formal authority. However, some had developed strategies to counteract this, such as aligning themselves with senior managers or those with influence in the corporate office, or using key allies in other departments to gain entry into decision-making processes.

3.1.6 Focus

The final set of tensions has been clustered under the heading of ‘focus’ to reflect what practitioners directed their attention towards in practice. There are a lot of tensions in this cluster as it reflects the ‘doing’ end of the work. The study found that practitioners oscillate between planning and responding, outcomes and process, leading and supporting, clear and undefined targets, immediate and also long-term goals, and understanding and acting.

• Planning and Responding

The first tension to be highlighted is between planning and responding. Each practitioner had a ‘plan’ for their department, whether this was a whiteboard list or a sub-component of the site’s overall strategic plan, so planning was important for staying focused on tasks and targets to be achieved, and also for communicating the focus of the community relations department to others. On the other hand, because of the nature of community relations, practitioners also had to be ready to ‘respond’. They were observed to put their plans aside in order to respond to community complaints, calls for information, issues management, as well as their managers, General Managers, the media, and the corporate office. Practitioners indicated that it was easy to get stuck in ‘response mode’ in community relations work and forget about the plan.

• Outcomes and Processes

It was easier to see tangible outcomes achieved in other areas than in community relations. Environment departments can demonstrate the success of a rehabilitation program via trees and species counts. PR departments can point to brochures, videos and positive press.
Tangible outcomes are less obvious in community relations work, for example, improved relationships.

Most other disciplines at a minerals operation have an obvious form and physicality; the community relations function stood in contrast to this. Even personnel working in human resources, another people-orientated area, could point to employees, training courses and apprentices who had completed their training. Many processes of community relations prevent rather than produce outcomes. Several practitioners lamented that other managers did not appreciate this dynamic.

Methodologically, processes of relationship building were central to community relations work. However, a focus on outcomes was more often than not encouraged within the operational setting. Many management meetings focused on outcomes, such as tonnes mined or processed, or ounces recovered. In these meetings the types of metrics presented for community relations included the number and/or reduction/increase in community complaints, sponsorships and donations expenditure and local and Indigenous employment rates. While some of these metrics are useful, they overlook the importance of the process-orientated work of community relations.

Several practitioners found it difficult to document processes used in their work. Process flow charts were common in the other disciplines, and could be observed simply by walking into engineering and production areas and seeing diagrams and flow charts adorning walls. These processes were clear and defined, linear in appearance, and had clear causal outcomes. Processes for the community relations area were often contingent on the situation and the people involved, and therefore remained an unpredictable aspect of the work.

- **Leading and Supporting**

Traditionally, mining companies have been paternalistic in their approach to community assistance. These days, such paternalism is considered to be inconsistent with the principles of sustainable development, where the emphasis is on promoting community viability. The practitioners in this study were moving away from leading the community to playing a more supportive role, for example, in developing closure plans, organising community events and in community development programs. However, practitioners work in organisational environments where leadership is considered a highly desirable attribute. It was sometimes difficult for practitioners to maintain a supportive position because leadership received recognition and public acknowledgement, whereas supporters were often silent contributors.

Practitioners expressed frustration that while a support role was more aligned with the principles of sustainable development, some community members still expected them to take the lead because they had better access to resources and a greater capacity. Other community members were pleased to see the company back off from decision-making processes.
• **Defined and Unclear (Goals/Targets)**

The practitioners indicated that various aspects of their work were unclear or hazy. There was a pervasive lack of clarity about responsibility for community relations at several levels, including between practitioners and departments but also between corporate/regional offices and sites. Reporting arrangements were often unclear, with a number of informal and dotted-line reporting arrangements that were not documented. Practitioners also lamented that they had corporate standards to implement, but no clear guidelines for applying them in the local context, such as how the notion of human rights applied to their work.

Practitioners said they often had to argue the business case for many of their initiatives. They said unless their rationale was clear, it was difficult to achieve resource allocation. They said the case was most clear when Native Title and land access issues were involved, and when they could tie initiatives directly to production. Practitioners considered community relations to be an area of practice where there were not clear paths forward and no right answers, which often made it difficult to secure resources.

• **Immediate and Future**

Practitioners explained that a focus on sustainable development meant they not only had to work to minimise impacts and maximise benefits in the immediate term, but also consider future generations. The practitioners oscillated between a focus on the short and long term, both conceptually and in practice. They were expected to work with a view to closure, which at several operations was more than 20 years away, as well as generate daily, weekly and monthly performance data in areas such as community complaints, Indigenous employment levels and cultural heritage assessments. Moreover, they had to demonstrate continuous incremental improvement while keeping the long-term strategy of sustainable development in mind.

Several practitioners explained that the nature of their work was such that if they focused too much on the short term, they would get disgruntled and disillusioned. However, with little time to plan and a bias towards responding, it was difficult to see how practitioners would ever manage to focus on the long term, although they knew they had to do so, given the principles of sustainable development.

• **Understanding and Acting**

Practitioners also explained that they were often unsure as to whether to focus their energies on understanding as opposed to acting. They explained that it was often difficult to get budget approval for processes that would lead to better understanding of the community such as social impact assessment and community needs analysis, because there was no clear ‘output’ even though the process was an important relationship-building exercise itself.

Practitioners explained that other managers were often keen to jump into “solutions mode” sometimes without fully understanding the social issues and the dynamics involved, particularly when a technical solution appeared obvious. Several practitioners indicated this was a battle, as they knew they had to act and implement their programs and projects, but they had to be mindful that they also had to understand social complexities.
3.2 “Double-Handedness” in Community Relations: A Key Enabler

Analysis of the 18 tensions outlined above revealed a clear pattern; practitioners cannot ignore one side of a tension at the expense of the other, but need to hold both sides in dynamic tension to do community relations work. The ability to work double-handed across each of these tensions is a key enabler in community relations work.

Consider the tension between the internal and external space. Practitioners need to move between both spaces. If they only worked in the community space, they would limit their ability to influence internally and change organisational behaviour. Conversely, if practitioners spent too much time in the internal space and ignored the external, they would lose touch with the community. Community relations is as much about the internal space as it is about the external. The same argument holds for the tension between personal and professional modes of working. Although the ability to relate to people on a personal level is important, if practitioners lose sight of their professional responsibilities managers may ‘write them off’, disregard their opinion/advice and/or de-legitimise their standing within the organisation or the management team. Even though personal dimensions of community relations work are indispensable, they cannot be overemphasised, or prioritised at the expense of the professional. The tension between conflict and consensus also illustrates the importance of double-handedness. Conflict is important for generating new ideas and insights, so if only agreement is sought, then there is little chance of differences of opinion and new ways of thinking emerging.

What does this mean for community relations practitioners? Does it mean that practitioners cannot emphasise one side of a tension over the other? A key conclusion from the study is that practitioners can emphasise one side where the need for change is manifest, but must not lose sight of the other side of the tension. Practitioners are most effective when they mindfully and consciously work across tensions, operating in a two-handed or ambidextrous manner, allowing one or other of the hands to dominate according to the situation, without losing sight of the other side of the tension.

Ambidexterity conjures up images of two hands working in a complementary fashion, sometimes in opposition, to achieve, build and/or create things. If the tensions are considered this way, then both sides of each tension should work to balance the other. One side of a tension should not preclude or totally discount the other, even though one arm might be more dominant at certain points or for particular tasks. Each tension should allow both arms to find expression when required. The example below demonstrates how, when tensions are balanced, community relations work is enabled:

There had been a long-running dispute between neighbouring residents and operations at one of the case study sites. Neighbours complained constantly about various smells that came from the plant. Different parts of the operation had key performance indicators for community complaints, but when the community lodged a complaint, they tended to deny responsibility, blaming another area. Without accurate descriptions of particular smells, there was no
way of pinpointing the source. The community relations practitioner at this site persuaded management to support the establishment of an Odour Working Group, with membership comprising representatives from every area of the operation and neighbouring residents. Both management and neighbours agreed. The Practitioner arranged for odours to be scientifically modelled, matched with the source and a description. The formulation of a description was very important and involved neighbours and operations people agreeing on a layman’s description e.g. ‘hot coal’, ‘burning rubber’, ‘sweet/hot metal’. It involved breaking odour up from ‘bad smell’ into its sub-component parts so that everyone could relate to the terminology. This way, when neighbours rang to complain they could describe the smell as they experienced it, and the site could pinpoint where it was coming from. The Practitioner explained that the success of the working group relied on many things, including support from management and cooperation from operations, but in particular feedback from the community about consequent remedial actions so operations people knew what worked and what didn’t.

By relating to each other, operations people and neighbours were able to develop an approach that embraced both technical and relational aspects. If the practitioner had focused on the relationship alone, neighbours may not have come to the table, as they were interested in eliminating odour as a priority, not developing an amicable relationship. Practitioner 2’s approach satisfied all parties because it was quantitative, scientific and technical, yet qualitative and relational at the same time. It also developed the skills and abilities of others in balancing the technical-relational tension, which helped enable community relations at an organisational level.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Using the Framework

The framework developed around the 18 key practice tensions provides a useful reference point for practitioners, organisations and their managers for reflecting on community relations practice. Practitioners may use it to understand which sides of tensions they emphasise in their work, and whether they also hold the other side in view. The framework may also help determine which tensions are the most problematic in their particular context, and why. Organisation managers and/or senior leaders may use the framework to consider whether their organisational culture is one-sided or flexible enough to support both sides of tensions. The framework may also be used as a reference point when considering the development of community relations practitioners.

4.2.1 Development of Community Relations Practitioners

There are arguments that support a more professional approach in community relations, as there is a need to develop a greater level of rigour to the practice. There are already moves within the minerals industry to professionalise community relations by considering core competencies and encouraging coherence among practitioners as an occupational group. However, given the results of the study, the notion of double-handedness or ambidexterity should also be taken into account.
A traditional approach to professionalisation is based on the development of exclusive knowledge, specialisation and demarcating professional boundaries. Such an approach to professionalisation seems counter-productive given that the study showed that knowledge sharing supports community relations at the operational level. So, while there is a need to further develop knowledge in the area of community relations, this should be shared with other professions.

How could the development of community relations practitioners be approached? Rather than applying the traditional model of professionalism, minerals organisations may be best served by encouraging community relations workers to move between and among various disciplines and professions, possibly even conceptualising community relations as a kind of ‘meta-profession’, where knowledge and skills from various disciplines is required in order to do effective community relations.

For a practitioner with well-developed skills in the social sciences, training may focus, for example on the hard sciences, engineering-type concepts and quantitative analysis. This would assist the practitioner to operate on the ‘technical’ and ‘rational’ side of the relevant tensions. A set of core competencies for community relations that ignored other professional areas would be one-sided, and inadequate. Conversely, for a practitioner who has moved from a technical discipline, training and development may focus on engagement and consultation, cultural heritage and the more ‘emotional’ aspects of community relations. The ideal would be to balance both sides of each tension in community relations practice.

Practitioners and their organisations will also need to reflect critically on how they might look to position themselves alongside well-established and dominant professions. The study suggests they should avoid becoming locked into any one professional discourse and way of constructing reality. Professional agility seems to be consistent with the complexity and fluidity of community relations as a functional area in the minerals industry, and would work to ensure that practitioners are always able to balance both sides of each tension.

5.0 CONCLUSION

There are many facets to exploring practice tensions in community relations work in the minerals industry. The findings of the study confirm that the work is a practice full of tension and dilemma, always complex and sometimes even contradictory. A set of 18 key practice tensions was articulated and analysed. The framework developed around the 18 key practice tensions provides a useful reference point for practitioners, organisations and their managers for reflecting on community relations practice to ensure that tensions are being adequately balanced and that the work is not becoming one-sided. The analysis found that practitioners were best served when they did not ignore one side of a tension at the expense of another. The notion of ambidexterity was found to be a key enabling force in community relations work.

The paper also reflected on the development of community relations professionals and offered a perspective that would see the industry move away from a conventional approach to
professionalisation, which focuses on demarcating professional boundaries and exclusive knowledge, to one where practitioners would move within and amongst other professions, developing knowledge and skills in other professional areas as well as in community relations. This ‘meta-profession’ approach presents minerals companies and training/education organisations with challenges as it will require them to be responsive to the background and experience of individual practitioners and their site contexts, rather than delivering a generic range of training and education. By advocating professional agility and flexibility, companies would also have to be prepared to re-visit how community relations is positioned alongside other well-established and dominant professions.