

The Five Stages of a Project

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In the 1960s a psychiatrist developed the concept of the “five stages of grief” model which identifies a series of common emotional steps people go through when dealing with a loss. They include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Those who work in the community association industry may have noticed an analogous set of steps among communities dealing with a major capital repair or improvement project. I refer to these as the Five Stages of a Project.

The next time that you work through a large project with a community, look for these stages among the board and membership. Recognizing these stages can help the professional team (manager, engineer, attorney, accountant, etc.) supporting a community through a project, to better cope with the stresses involved.

**DO
ONE
THING
BETTER**

Recognizing these stages can help the professional team... supporting a community through a project, to better cope with the stresses involved.

Five Stages of a Project

- 1. Denial** – Once the need for a project is presented to a community’s board, often their first reaction is to deny the existence of the issue. Following are some examples:
- The roof only leaks when it rains, we can wait a few more years to replace it.
 - The town gave a C.O. so the building must be OK.
 - Yes, the parking lot looks like a moonscape, but the

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FIVE STAGES...

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reserve study says we have two more years left in it.

- If we can't see any structural damage behind the siding, we don't really know it's there, do we?
- If I turn my TV up, I can't hear the pipes banging in the walls.

2. Anger and Blame – Once homeowners begin to understand that the need for a project is real, they often become angry and want to find someone to blame. Sometimes this turns into "who can we sue?". Common comments include:

- Can't we sue the builder?
- I thought the city inspector was inspecting this work.

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- The [manager/board/engineer/ (fill in the blank)] should have told us about this sooner. There is no "Transparency".
- I just bought my place and the seller didn't mention any of this, can I sue the seller?
- Do we need to replace the board? (Sometimes this sentiment is accompanied by pitchforks and torches.)

3. Bargaining – This stage usually begins when the scope and cost of the project is presented. Many creative alternative approaches are presented, including comments such as:

- Can't we just put some monkey glue on it, to hold the brick on the walls?

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FIVE STAGES...

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- You're showing us a "Cadillac" solution when all we need is the Chevy.
- Can't we use cheaper materials?
- I had my own home for 30 years and I replaced my [roof/deck/driveway/foundation/etc.] and it didn't cost half of what you're saying this project will cost.
- My [father/brother/uncle/best friend from high school/bartender/etc.] is in the business and he says he can do it for half of the proposed cost.
- We need a committee to review all of the bids received.
- Can we pay for all of this from Reserves?

4. Buy-In – Once the need for the project, as well as the steps taken by the Board and the association's professional team to protect the community are understood

by the membership, most (but never all) will buy-in to the project. You know you have buy-in when you see:

- People asking if they can write a check now and be done with it.
- Homeowners asking if their home can be done first.
- People volunteering for the landscaping committee for after the project is done.
- Someone stands up in the middle of an open meeting and says, "I want to thank the board, our manager and all of our professionals for their hard work in getting this project off the ground". (Yes, it has happened.)

5. Construction – The construction stage of a project can be easier than all of the preceding stages.

- Early on in the construction phase, you will still have to deal with some emotional responses, like:
 - I don't want to move my car; can't they pave around it?
 - Why does the contractor have to start work so early, I don't like to get up before 10:00 a.m.

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- Since you replaced the roof, my kitchen cabinets won't close.
- The Contractor is bothering my ferret.
- As the project nears completion, you may start to see signs of hope and optimism spreading throughout the community. You may get voicemail or emails saying things like:

Community members do not always move linearly through the 5 Stages and some become stuck in one stage or another.

DO
ONE
THING
BETTER

- It looks like they are done on my balcony, can I put my furniture back?
- Our building looks brand new
- All the puddles are gone from the parking lot.
- I don't have to put towels on the windowsill when it rains.
- I heard that the unit around the corner just sold for more than asking price.

Construction projects in community associations will always cause some level of stress among the residents. If you look for them, you will likely see one or more of the 5 Stages discussed above. Community members do not always move linearly through the 5

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FIVE STAGES...

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Stages and some become stuck in one stage or another. A few members will always get stuck in or fall back to Stage 2, anger and blame. While this article doesn't offer advice as to how to help members through each stage, by recognizing some of the stages, you, as a property manager, board member or professional, can adjust your reaction and response to people who are working their way through the 5 Stages of a Project. ■

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