

## James Cameron's *Avatar* and a discussion on Community Engagement

As strange as this may sound, the Hollywood blockbuster, *Avatar*, has made my job easier; at least the task of explaining my job. After trying and failing to sufficiently explain my work to my family over the holidays, watching *Avatar* provided them with a visually dazzling illustration of community engagement that my explanation was lacking. Thank you James Cameron!

The plot is simple. After humans have environmentally degraded their home planet, a mega-corporation, along with their heavily armed military-contracted guards, sets up mining operations on the far off, and somewhat inhospitable, planet of Pandora. It just so happens that the Na'vi, a strong-bodied, organically-living, indigenous tribe of Pandora happen to have their ancestral home and roots (quite literally) domiciled on top of the richest deposit of the most expensive mineral sold on Earth; the ingeniously named Unobtainium. What ensues are feeble attempts by the company to negotiate with the natives for mining access, and thus the archetypal David and Goliath "company exerts force, natives fight back and win" story.

The Corporate Engagement Project has worked with companies over the past nine years to address impacts of company operations on local communities and how to achieve constructive community engagement—issues *Avatar* touches on. While my sister warned me before seeing the movie, "Don't bother paying attention to the plot, it's all about the special effects," I actually found myself engrossed in the plot. It was as if Cameron wrote this movie based on a chapter out of a textbook on how companies fail to win their social license to operate.

In the movie, Sigourney Weaver's research team serves as the designated gurus on community engagement. Weaver's character, Dr. Augustine, expresses a deep concern and love for the indigenous groups. But try as she might, her efforts are undermined by trigger-happy company management, who are ready and willing to take the locals' land by any means necessary. Cameron's story suggests that company staff passing themselves off as natives, and bestowing upon the Na'vi tools to assimilate to the culture of their uninvited guests (e.g. schools and clinics), are sufficient methods to achieve constructive and on-going engagement. Although Dr. Augustine has the most forward thinking notion of all of the humans, the scheme of learning the Na'vi's language as a tool for arguing them off the land has its shortcomings. At no point does the movie demonstrate that the company makes a genuine attempt to truly understand what the Na'vi are seeking in relation to the presence of the company, as evidenced by management undersigning a preemptive strike by hired guns, before any consultations can even take place. The hero of the film is incentivized to perform a dual role: learn the Na'vi's ways in order to negotiate them off the land, or learn their ways to be able to hit them where it hurts. In both cases, "make it easier for the corporation to get rid of the nuisance."

Through messages of pro-science, environment, and community, what is Cameron trying to say with his technological marvel? It might be easy to lose the more covert messages of the movie, as evidenced by my sister's previous forewarning. Clearly, corporate interests come under fire in the movie, and clearly the viewer is easily convinced to root for the natives who are interested in protecting their mother planet and their ancestral knowledge. However, I would not argue that Cameron's message is anti-corporate,

given the irony of these messages being delivered through a big budget display made possible by advanced technology.

Rather, he pushes us to advance our expectations of corporate citizenship, not about *what* is done, but *how* it is done. His call is not only for better technology, but also better practices in seeking and manipulating that technology. *Avatar* demonstrates that while advancement may be important to some, when it is being solely driven by corporate interests, it is not a good method. Rather, a collaborative effort, where each actor is willing to genuinely engage and learn from others involved--including the local people --can temper the harm caused by single-minded ambition. If anything, Cameron reminds us that ignorance is not bliss. Carefully weighing and assessing our every move, from individual interference to corporate actions, is necessary to constantly assess how we impact our surroundings as well as how our surroundings impact us.

While Hollywood depicts the bad guys as single-minded, one-dimensional characters, CEP has found that corporate managers generally are not intentionally trying to do ill. We have also found that community engagement is not about building schools, clinics or teaching English. Rather, we hear from local communities and stakeholders that more important than *what* the company does, is *how* the company does it. We have heard from community members that, when companies set up shop in a new area, the community expects that they will receive a fair share of the jobs, contracts, and social services from the production activities of the company. This raises the question what is definition of fair? And how does one achieve it?

Through 25+ site visits, CEP has heard community members suggest that the way to ensure positive and constructive community engagement is by carrying out corporate policies and practices through a lens of four guiding principles:

- Fairness – Does the company’s distribution of jobs and contracts, social investment, and land compensation meet the community’s definition of fair?
- Respect – When the company meets with communities to listen and share ideas about their collective future do they show respect and trust building with the community?
- Accountability – Does the company demonstrate broad accountability for managing and mitigating changes in the community (e.g. influx of people, stress on infrastructure) or does it only fulfill minimum legal and geographic requirements?
- Transparency – Does the company meet regularly with the community to openly share information - both benefits and negative side effects - about operations?

So, as I turned to my step-brother to get his reaction to the movie, I imagined, what would CEP do in this situation if we stepped in to partner with this company and community?