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9 Ways to Kill Public Confidence in Your Organization and How To Avoid Them

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A Scenario: What Can Happen To a Sewage Sludge Program With No Community Relations Component

During the 1980s, wastewater utilities across the country upgraded their treatment processes and in doing so produced more sewage sludge. Instead of disposing of the sludge, many utilities developed innovative land application programs by turning sludge into soil enrichers and fertilizers. Government agencies had established it as a safe, economical and beneficial product when used appropriately and within environmental regulations.

One city utility, we will call Yourville Wastewater Company, instituted a program to transport and apply its sludge to help restore strip mines. The Yourville Wastewater Company hired a contractor to transport, store, apply and monitor the sewage sludge and revegetate thousands of acres of barren strip mines. Over the next five years, there were very few complaints from the host communities, and the program was deemed by the wastewater utility an environmental success story.

However, during the following year the contracting firm received some negative media coverage about an unrelated issue in a city several hundred miles away. The story was picked up by a newspaper in one of the communities where the contractor was operating the sludge application program for the utility.

From that day forward, Yourtown Wastewater Company was engaged in a community relations nightmare that marred the entire program for years and ultimately led to its demise in those communities. Although there was never an environmental problem discovered at any of the sites, the community linked the contractor's negative reputation with the sites, thereby becoming distrustful of the entire program. The utility spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours trying to restore its public image.

What Went Wrong

In the eyes of the host communities, the contractor was the only entity the citizens associated with the program. The utility had maintained a laissez faire attitude toward the program, allowing the contractor all the visibility in the community. The utility was unable to disassociate itself from the contractor's problem because it had not been vigilant in initiating and maintaining responsibility for the program.

There was no community relations plan in place. The contractor had disseminated mandatory information to the community under the then current regulations. These communications were cursory and only worked when there were no problems. When dealing with sensitive environmental activities there are bound to be issues; it is therefore necessary to plan and provide a continuous flow of information. In this case, water pollution, odors, hazardous wastes and traffic problems were the environmental issues of concern to citizens.

Involving the Public and Preventing Problems

As many organizations can attest, resolving community problems after they have surfaced may cost the organization more money and time than preventing them in the first place. If left unattended, the problems can cost the organization its reputation.

On the other hand, when an organization applies basic community relations

principles by staying close to stakeholders and listening to their opinions, trust and confidence grow. The organization is then prepared to meet tough challenges and resolve complex community issues.

In the following sections, we present arguments often heard from organizations unwilling to engage in public participation and then in turn, propose ways of involving the public and preventing problems.



"Community Relations Costs Money Needed to Solve The Problem."

It is not unusual for an organization to view allocating funds for community relations a low priority, a last resort when faced with an imminent crisis, or at the other extreme, a marketing or public relations tool applied during the company's heyday. Instead, investing in community relations when a project is initiated and making it an integral part of the operations of an organization can have a positive impact on the organization's bottom line. Yearly maintenance of an effective community relations program, for example, may cost less than 1% of the operating budget.

Community relations is an investment in the future of your organization with benefits that far outweigh costs. Whether it is a public demonstration, launched by grassroots groups or embedded in sophisticated legal battles, or a public outcry caused by actual or perceived problems, community outrage has been the Achilles' heel of many companies. Community outrage has cost organizations millions of dollars, and in some cases has been the harbinger of their decline.



"We're Afraid If We Involve The Public, The Project Won't Happen."

The key to this problem is timing. Start the public dialogue at the beginning of the project or risk project delays. There are many examples of the disastrous ramifications of presenting the project to the public too late, when construction is about to begin or when important documents are made public only after a legal mandate requires publication.

War stories about public attacks on projects are often similar. With great fanfare, local business and public officials bring a neatly designed and packaged project to the people, only to be surprised by the public protests. The project supporters think they are supporting economic development and improving the community's quality of life, but the public views the tidy packaging as an attempt to hide a threat to the community's well-being.

These days, public action groups are often successful at delaying or stopping almost any type of project through

legal or political, economic and environmental interests in the project. By keeping community representatives apprised of the project's progress, lasting relationships are formed and projects are more likely to progress.



"We Have to Come Up With The Technical and Design Parameters Before We Go To the Public."

Too often, the company's policymakers direct the engineering department to develop a project and then bring in the communications specialists to market it to the public. Under this scenario, the organization has already made choices and eliminated alternatives. The organization then asks the public to rubber stamp the decision. The natural reaction to what the public refers to as "lip service" is alienation and mistrust of the organization, its leaders and their motives.

Instead, at the inception of a project, assemble a group of professionals who represent the diversified expertise of the organization and the affected neighborhood, business and community leaders and opinion makers to participate in the deliberation process.

Consensus-building requires time and a lot of communication and public process. If a project can't make it through the planning process with involvement from the public, it will certainly meet with public opposition when it is half constructed. It is a lot cheaper to face the realities of public opposition to a project when it is initially considered rather than when it is half built.



"We Already Know What The Public Thinks About The Organization and The Project."

Maybe an organization has gathered enough information about the stakeholders to anticipate their opinions about a project. Perhaps it has administered surveys, listened at community meetings and watched the community's reaction to similar circumstances. If so, that organization is way ahead of the pack.

Chances are, however, that if the sponsoring organization has information about the community, it is outdated, left over from the last controversial project, and not specific enough to be relevant to the current situation. It is always a good idea to find out how the customers, the community and other stakeholders currently perceive the organization and the specific project in question.

Examine and explore the community. Identify the community members, citizens and nearby businesses who may be impacted by your project. Investigate the demographic mix (i.e., age, origins and politics) of the community and its values. Ask community members what concerns they have about the organization or project and how the organization can effectively communicate with them. After

gathering information about the community, compile information on past projects that the organization has administered. By disseminating information about how the organization has solved problems and handled past issues, you can build public and internal confidence in the organization's ability to solve current problems.



"Our Information Is Too Technical."

The public is often frustrated when an organization disseminates information that is in "tech talk." Community members often react to "tech talk" by becoming frustrated or by assuming that the organization does not want citizens to understand. These reactions often lead to the anger and resistance that can stymie projects. Simplifying the language to present information is often as easy as finding someone who understands the process and is able to explain it without using technical jargon.

Human beings fear what they do not understand. Translating technical language makes the project more understandable, so that the community will be less skeptical that the organization is obfuscating the issue. Technical information introduced in a simple, easy-to-understand manner through discussions and presentations, workshops, exhib-

its and publications can offer reassurance that the organization is being open and honest. An organization can best fulfill its mission by presenting clear, concise information.



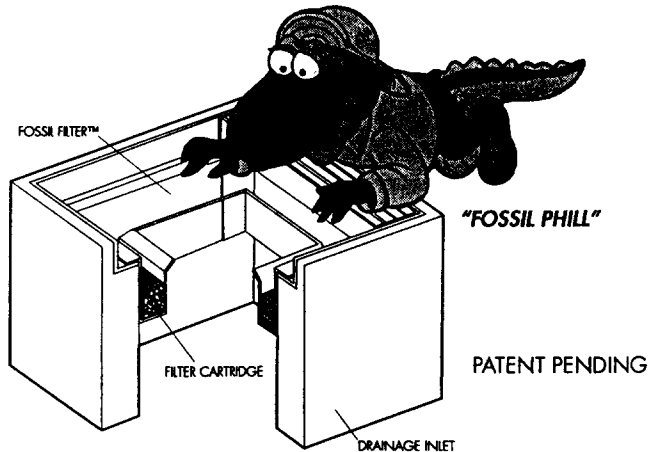
"Our Community Does Not Want To Communicate With Us."

If community members do not trust an organization, they may be wary of discussing their issues. Listening to the public concerns can be an important first step toward building positive relationships. Community relations professionals open lines of communication and initiate the dialogue. Once a dialogue has begun, the community will be more willing to participate in the discussion. In fact, they may appreciate that the organization is listening to their concerns. It is never too late to begin the communications process. Once the dialogue has begun, a broader range of community relations tools, through which the community can become acquainted with the organization, can be employed.

An organization may also perceive a community as apathetic, after the organization has attempted to hold a public meeting with little or no turnout. However, it is a mistake to assume that these citizens will not protest a project when they perceive a threat. Reach out to citizens

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in ways that welcome their participation. In some neighborhoods, finding the trusted community leaders and true communicators in the community is the most effective way to increase involvement. In other neighborhoods, delivering information to people through flyers or news articles is most effective.



"We Don't Want The Community To Know Too Much."

People have an uncanny ability to sense when an organization is not being open and honest with them. Often when people lack information, they will fill in gaps with inaccurate information that is often worse or more feared than the real facts would be. If the information is provided accurately, the community and other stakeholders are more trusting. Community and grassroots groups are increasingly powerful in affecting policy and delaying or stopping a project. Involving the community in decision making from the beginning will ensure that a project is not halted in the middle because of community opposition. To involve the community, give tours of existing facilities, hold regular project progress meetings and solicit public concerns. Translate concerns into corrective actions or explain reasons for the inability to do so. Attend and sponsor community events and activities. Address environmental risks by holding public meetings and communicating information about the benefits and risks of alternatives.



"There Won't Be a Crisis" or "There Are No Environmental, Health and Safety Risks."

An organization engaged in a project can never be sure that there will not be risks or a crisis in the future. Prepare for the worst-case scenario by developing a community emergency response plan and sharing it with the community. Provide environmental, health and safety information associated with the project. Ask for comments and reactions. Present information early in the planning process and in its entirety, and offer preventive and mitigative measures for the situation. During times of low risk, an organization can present information in an orderly and informative fashion, and the public can listen without the inherent emotional response that comes with personal health and safety concerns.



"There are Too Many Problems Right Now to Think About Public Opinion."

Waiting too long to initiate communications can make an organization's problems grow. Communicating with the

community during a crisis is much easier if the groundwork has been laid with the community during the organization's quiet, uneventful periods. It is important to get out in front of the situation and take responsibility for any problems the crisis may have caused. Hold meetings to inform the community about the cause of the problem; related environmental, health and safety issues and remedies; and prevention in the future. The public is reassured if the organization acknowledges an understanding of their concerns.

In conclusion, an organization should be proactive in positioning itself to establish and maintain good relations with the stakeholders. Keeping the doors of communication open with the community establishes trust and provides information and can develop a long-term relationship. Although there is no guarantee that a community will endorse an organization's project, an open, honest relationship with knowledgeable stakeholders will ensure that the issue or project receives a fair assessment and is in the best possible position for community support.

This article is reprinted from the March 1996 issue of "The Weston Way."

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