Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute

Public Relations, Public Issues & Local Public Policy

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8:15-11:45

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• TOPICS FOR TODAY
  – Controversial public issues
  – Responses to conflict
  – Process planning skill – issue and stakeholder mapping
  – Responding to difficult, angry behaviors
Hillville Park Scenario

What to do about park?
• Now: picnic tables, grass mowed for “passive recreation”, woodland
• Town character: rural
• Recent population growth – new needs for park, new residents, new ideas

Options proposed:
• Maintain as is
• Minor changes (eg. pave parking lot)
• Develop into full scale recreation facility
• Build environmental education center

CONFLICT IS BREWING
Hillville Park Scenario

What have officials done to respond to the issue? Who was involved?

Examples:
- Discussed as routine town board agenda item
- Hired consultant with expertise in parks
- Went door to door to talk to constituents
- Sponsored public opinion survey
- Held public meeting at town hall
- Organized discussion at park involving [who?]
- Sponsored Future of Park ideas contest
- Invited landscape architecture class to propose designs
- Held series of closed-door meetings to figure out options
- Etc
The Nature of Conflict
How do you feel about conflict?
If so, how are you likely to respond?

self protectively? defensively? suspiciously?

unsure of what to do?
The consequence is all too often -

A CRISIS IN HUMAN INTERACTION
Conflict as opportunity…?

CONFLICT combines the symbols for "opportunity" and "danger/crisis"
Opportunity

Shift from weak to strong

Gain greater strength in self

• become calmer, clearer, more confident
• achieve greater clarity of purpose
• attain renewed sense of competence
• act and handle problems more effectively
• become a more creative, resourceful problem solver
Opportunity

Shift from weak to strong

Gain in awareness and understanding of the perspectives of others

- drop self-protective defensiveness
- clearer perception of reality outside yourself
- greater responsiveness to others
Opportunity: for learning

• People *pay attention* to conflict
• Levels of alertness increase

• Look for “teachable moments”

• Difficult but often possible to channel negative energy to constructive ends
Constructive Conflict

• When conflict becomes constructive, it leads to
  – Greater understanding of self and others
  – Mutual respect
  – Improved communication
  – Improved relationships
  – Greater self-reliance
  – Creative problem solving
Reversing Downward Spiral in Communication Relationship is Possible

See R.A.B. BUSH
Reversing Downward Spiral is Possible

- WEAK
- STRONG
- SELF-ABSORBED
- RESPONSIVE

Negative
Destructive
Alienating
Demonizing

Positive
Constructive
Connecting
Humanizing

R.A.B. BUSH
Public Issue: Response Stance

• Adversarial Stance
  – Circle the wagons
  – Ignore complaints
  – Depend on political advantages (power)
  – Depend on legal advantages (power)

• Inclusive Stance
  – Communicate proactively
  – Solve problems collaboratively
  – Seek mutual gains
  – Seek solutions mediated by neutral parties
Involving the Public

IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum

Inform
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

Consult
To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Involve
To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

Collaborate
To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Empower
To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

Public participation goal

Promise to the public
We will keep you informed.
We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.
We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.
We will implement what you decide.

Example techniques
- Fact sheets
- Web sites
- Open houses
- Public comment
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Public meetings
- Workshops
- Deliberative polling
- Citizen advisory Committees
- Consensus-building
- Participatory decision-making
- Citizen juries
- Ballots
- Delegated decision
Stakeholder/Issue Maps

City of Ithaca….

…comprehensive plan
Stakeholder/Issue Map

Triangles – municipal stakeholders
Rectangles – activity/user stakeholders
Ovals - other interest groups
Numbers – representation at meeting
Responding to difficult, angry behaviors

- Listen well – *don’t move too quickly to interrupt* with reflection and summary. Emotional people need to let off steam before you can move forward
- **Avoid arguing**, rebuttal, defensiveness
- **Remain even tempered** yourself
- **Validate feelings** without endorsing content
- Ask *questions that clarify* feelings, what has happened
Skill: Reframing/ “Taking the bite out of” Angry, Hostile Statements

• Goal: restatement of angry words to retain and acknowledge key content while using less inflammatory language

• Example

  • Citizen – “The Supervisor has lied through her teeth about that property from the beginning. I now know her word isn’t worth the paper it’s written on!”

  • Rebutting/defensive response – “That’s plain wrong! You must not have understood a thing she has said for the past three months!”

  • Alternative Response: “So…based on your experiences, you are unable to trust any of the Supervisor’s statements about this property?”
Reframing/ “taking the bite out of” Angry Statements

• Example II

• Citizen – “You people are all in the pockets of the developer, that’s for sure. This meeting makes a mockery of democracy!”

• Rebutting/defensive response – “Come on, now! We’re following totally proper procedure by allowing the developer to make a presentation to the board.”

• Alternative Response: “So, you feel pretty strongly that the interests of people who aren’t the developer simply won’t be taken into account. Did I get that right?”
# Roadblocks to communication

## Responses that take the focus off the speaker (too soon)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixing their problem:</th>
<th>Evaluating them:</th>
<th>Diverting them or negating concerns:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Giving orders</td>
<td>• Judging</td>
<td>• Reassuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Suggesting</td>
<td>• Threatening</td>
<td>• Minimizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advising</td>
<td>• Praising</td>
<td>• Taking sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using logical</td>
<td>• Diagnosing</td>
<td>• Giving opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arguments</td>
<td>• Taking sides</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cross-examining</td>
<td>• Giving opinions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Providing them with</td>
<td></td>
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<td>information</td>
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Roadblocks to communication:

- Fixing their problem:
  - Giving orders
  - Suggesting
  - Advising
  - Using logical arguments
  - Cross-examining
  - Providing them with information

- Evaluating them:
  - Judging
  - Threatening
  - Praising
  - Diagnosing
  - Taking sides
  - Giving opinions

- Diverting them or negating concerns:
  - Reassuring
  - Minimizing
  - Taking sides
  - Giving opinions
  - Changing the subject
Responding to difficult behaviors (other ideas)

• Be **transparent**
  
  – *Assert clearly what you can/can’t do*, state what you are doing and why
  
  – *Name* what is going on
  
  – Refer to procedural *guidelines, working agreements, behavioral norms*

• Encourage everyone to **attack the problem, not the people**

• Is anger in danger of being directed at *you*?

• Evaluate the potential for violence
Difficult behaviors (cont.)

- Try to figure out what is underneath the behavior. Use simple constructive questions to stop the attack and invite more positive participation.
  - Can you slow down? I want to make sure I understand what you’re saying.
  - How do you want this to be recorded in the official record?
  - What do you really think we should do? How could we accomplish that?
Difficult behaviors (cont.)

• Accept that you cannot control everything. Don’t respond to the process or substance as personal attacks.

• Don’t assume that all difficult people are alike. Some are truly “unique”, but many:
  – Just want attention and recognition
  – Want a specific outcome and will fight to get it
  – Don’t know or don’t have a more constructive way to participate.
  – Think they’re being helpful

Source: Bill Potapchuk, Program for Community Problem Solving
Difficult behaviors (cont.)

- **Attention seeking**: It does not usually cost anything to offer recognition and invite positive participation.

- **Fighting for an outcome**: Offer a more constructive channel than fighting. Invite them into the process. Fighters and dirty fighters are best handled through a jointly acceptable process.

- **Being clueless**: Untrained participants can be educated to become good participants, much more easily than they can be suppressed.

- **Being “helpful”**: These people could be your allies! With guidance, they can often be a real asset.
Difficult behaviors (cont.)

Escalate your interventions very deliberately and slowly, from the lightest to the heaviest.

- Record
- Acknowledge, legitimate, deal, defer
- Refer to the record, rules or agenda
- Use body language to suppress or isolate
- Take them aside, talk directly about behavior
- Ask group support to suppress
  Suppress with group support
Directory of Community Dispute Resolution Centers

For CDRCs and other providers, go to http://www.nysdra.org/ and then “Find a CDRC”