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DOE'S PERSPECTIVE:
REACHING SUCCESS BY STANDING ON A THREE LEGGED STOOL

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DOE'S PERSPECTIVE: REACHING SUCCESS BY STANDING ON A THREE LEGGED STOOL

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ABSTRACT

Gridlock, inertia, conflict, outrage, bureaucracy, obstruction, media sensationalizing, courts, and politicians. These are the things that characterize any attempt to implement a public policy today.

It is worse today than it has ever been because the middle has dropped out of public opinion. We have today no consensus of public values. At Fernald, we have come to recognize that in order to achieve any success we must first build a public consensus about what success will look like.

We do this through a three-part approach we call the three legged stool. It includes public information, management involvement, and person-to-person communication. Each of these elements is essential.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT HELPS GET THINGS DONE

The reason we need to do public involvement is to make better decisions. Most of the Department of Energy's projects have failed or been stalled, not for technical reasons, but for political ones. In hindsight, we can say those projects were bad public policy decisions. This is not a phenomenon unique to the Department of Energy. All around the country, there are important projects that have failed because the appropriate political work has not accompanied the technical work. In Cincinnati there is a road like that. It was supposed to be a limited access inner belt across the north part of the city. It is called the cross-county highway. Unfortunately it doesn't cross the county. At one end of the county it begins, runs a couple of exits and then stops. At the other end of the county it begins, runs a couple or exits and then stops. The cross county highway never crosses the county. It would be more aptly named the highway at either side of the county. Good money was spent to begin this project and plan it. It would be a useful part of the highway net but the necessary political support for it was never generated.

Managers who believe that their only responsibility for their project is technical are likely to fail. In our society, ordinary citizens have the power to stop projects by demonstrating, lobbying their congressional delegation, going to court, using the mass media, and even violence. In order to succeed, managers have to adopt good public policies. Good policies meet the needs of the majority without harming the minority. Such a policy is usually not clear. It is not clear to the public and it is not clear to us as managers. Although all too often we get an idea in our head that is all too clear and all too wrong. If we had better feedback we might not embark on cross-county highway disasters. Choosing a good public policy is a process of discovery and creation. At the same time it is also a process of promotion. The way to make the best decisions and get support for that decision is by public involvement.

People have a fundamental desire to participate in decisions that affect their lives. There are many people whose lives can be affected by our operations. Some of these are residents near our operations, business leaders, people concerned about the environment, and perhaps most important, our own employees. If these people feel they cannot participate in decisions that affect them they might not accept those decisions. If they don't accept them, they may try to get them overturned. At the very least they will passively resist them.

This one fact about human behavior would be enough to justify a vigorous public involvement program. But there is another reason. Time has shown that many minds, working together, can often come up with better solutions for problems. It may take extra time at the beginning to involve more people in decision making, but it can save time and money before the process is over.

WHAT IS PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT?

Public involvement is not a vote, or a popularity contest. At the outset, someone must accept responsibility for making policy decisions. Public policy decisions are often difficult because conflicting interests must be balanced. Public involvement can make these decisions a little easier and help predict the level of public acceptance for a particular decision. Public involvement is a process to give those officials the best information to make an informed decision. It also makes sure that all the people who have concerns are heard.

The three legs of public involvement

Think of public involvement as a three-legged stool. Leg one is public information. Leg two is management involvement. Leg three is person-to-person communication.

1. Leg one: Public information

When people think of public involvement, they often think of public meetings, brochures, video production, and displays. These are elements of a good public information program, but they are only one leg of the public involvement stool. In most operations, it is the strongest and most well-developed leg. We have a talented and experienced Public Affairs staff that do these things well. Do not imagine, however, that you have good public involvement by just holding good meetings and producing good brochures.

2. Leg two: Management Involvement

Public involvement starts to become a reality when managers accept it as their responsibility and make it a regular part of their decision-making process. That process has the following steps:

- Identify the problem -- in clear terms.
- Identify why it must be solved and whether or not you and your organization are the right people to solve it.
- Identify the people and institutions likely to be affected by the problem or your attempts to resolve it.
- Speak to them and identify their concerns.
- Identify a set of alternatives that show different ways of taking action. Every person affected should be able to see at least one alternative that includes measures to protect their interests.
- Make sure the persons affected understand the alternatives and can see how at least one of the alternatives clearly addresses their concerns.
- Evaluate and refine the alternatives. Show the effects on everyone's values of each alternative.
- Give all affected parties an opportunity to say whether they think the alternatives have been described and evaluated accurately and fairly. Change the alternative if the new information warrants.
- Make the decision.
- Continue to evaluate progress using these same steps.

This may seem like a very long and complicated process. Sometimes it can be. For large projects it may take many studies and several years. For other, simple projects, it may only mean a meeting and a few phone calls. The important thing is to make it a natural way of doing things. It will save time in the long run.

When management becomes involved in this way, the public involvement stool becomes much stronger. The first leg of the stool, public information, starts to become more effective and meaningful to the public. The second leg, management involvement, places responsibility for public involvement with decision makers.

3. Leg three: Person-to-person communication

The last leg of public involvement is person-to-person communication. This is communication through personal relationships between site employees and members of the public.

Our society is overwhelmed with information. Most people are bombarded day and night by information, most of it considered irrelevant and perceived as serving someone else's interest, or being just plain false.

People tend to trust someone they know over a newspaper article or a television show. Experience tells us that in most American communities, even big cities, there is a relatively small group of opinion leaders. The opinion leaders reflect the values of a group of people who share a common interest. If their concerns are addressed before a decision is made, the decision will rarely be overturned.

At Fernald, we have designated employees to act as representatives to opinion leaders. These employees are called envoys. It is their job to cultivate a relationship with one or more opinion leaders. In some cases, this is a natural development of existing relationships. The important thing is the relationship not the message. It is not their job to promote the site or sell a program. Their most important job is to build and preserve a relationship of trust.

How the envoy concept works

For instance, the Fernald fire chief already has business contacts with fire chiefs and other emergency management people in the surrounding community. The envoy concept takes advantage of this relationship by making the fire chief the Fernald representative to the opinion group he or she is already contacting.

After all, the group naturally turns to the Fernald employee for information about site activities and related issues. Making that person the envoy merely recognizes that relationship and ensures that the envoy has complete, current and accurate information. Public Affairs gathers that information; envoys only need to tap into it.

Although the envoys can provide information, they should think of themselves as a pathway between the site and the public. Along this pathway travel messages, and concerns in both directions. Really important and complex issues may require dialogue between a site manager and some interested or concerned party. If the envoy has built trust in his relationships that trust will be, to some extent, extended to whoever the envoy introduces. Instant credibility. Because communication is two-way either through envoys or face-to-face management gets a much better

understanding of the concerns of the public.

After each contact, the envoys report on what they have learned. Public Affairs then passes along that information to managers. The envoys then ask Public Affairs for any information they need to pass on to their groups. The envoys also prepare a debriefing report for Public Affairs.

The fire chief is just one example of how an envoy might be recruited. Thirty or so envoys would be a powerful communication tool. With envoys, public meetings become less important than one-on-ones, which then may only serve as group affirmation of understandings reached through person-to-person contacts. Brochures or fact sheets become calling cards to reinforce messages the envoys deliver.

The envoy system has proven useful in some unexpected ways.

It is an early warning system to alert project managers that their actions could become a cause of controversy or that bad feelings are being developed because of operations.

It has become a source of new ideas and solutions.

It is a powerful communication tool. Through the network of envoys information can be conveyed swiftly and effectively.

It reduces media attention to your operations. If something happens at our site, like an environmental spill, or an accident, we can get rapid, accurate information to community opinion leaders through a credible source. The outrage factor goes down, by the time reporters start getting quotable quotes, the quotes are less likely to have anger toward us.

Other techniques to enhance public participation

The three-legged stool requires new communication techniques to support it. Traditional methods, most of which only promote one-way communication, are not sufficient to fully involve the public.

Although a certain level of public participation is required by various laws and regulations governing radioactive and toxic waste, most of these activities are retroactive; the public gets

its say only after the initial recommendation has been made. As discussed earlier, the consequences of the public not supporting a particular decision can be time-consuming and costly.

At Fernald, we are changing the old way of doing things in order to maximize public involvement in an efficient and effective manner. While this requires more initial planning, the rewards promise to be great.

Some of the techniques we are introducing at Fernald modify traditional public information techniques to make them more interactive. Some of those include:

- Publishing a community bulletin that summarizes the status of studies and activities supporting various phases of the Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study, as well as other cleanup actions. For example, the bulletin would discuss all the disposal options being considered for the site, even before the actual studies are underway. The community bulletin is primarily an external communication tool.
- Introducing a question-and-answer column in the monthly bulletin, much like the question-and-answer feature in the Fernald employee publication *Focus*. With a Q&A column, the public will have a way to get information about the site without having to wait for a public meeting. The benefit for technical managers is that they get specific feedback about site-related activities. For example, the Q&A can be a barometer of the community's acceptance and opinions on such issues as transportation options.
- Inviting the public to comment on ideas as a partner in brainstorming sessions. Think of these public sessions as the CERCLA equivalent of NEPA scoping meetings. For example, if DOE decides to develop studies on various treatment options, there would be a public work session to solicit ideas and feedback from the community.
- The creation of a citizens advisory board commissioned to solve specific problems. Public involvement supports the work of this board, the Fernald Citizens Task Force. When information is provided to the task force, it is given to the public. The intention is to thwart any potential tendency to see the task force as the only group of stakeholders worth listening to. While the task force's membership is a diverse and balanced group that typifies the major stakeholders for the Fernald site, it cannot possibly represent every

interest without becoming too large and unwieldy. Sharing information with other constituencies, particularly those not directly represented on the task force, guarantees that public participation at Fernald is more than seeking consensus from the task force.

- Disseminating a "management memo" that provides information about policy and site issues for supervisory personnel. The management memo is primarily an internal communication tool.
- Creating a "newsroom" that provides accurate and up-to-date information about site activities and issues. This innovation, adapted from the operations of daily newspapers, is especially important for supporting the envoys. In the Fernald "newsroom," public affairs staff gather information from other divisions or departments, such as strategic planning, regulatory compliance, risk assessment, and construction. Envoys then draw upon that information as needed to fulfill the information needs of their constituencies.

The newsroom works like this:

Public Affairs staff -- primarily the counselors -- will gather information on all aspects of site operations and cleanup activities. Of course, anyone can be a "beat" reporter in the Public Affairs newsroom; managers may report information they received at a meeting or through other means. All managers or employees need to do is call or e-mail Public Affairs -- much the way members of the public call news organizations with news tips.

That information is compiled by the Public Affairs equivalent of a "city editor." The editor keeps the information in a easily accessible, centralized database.

This database functions much like a "wire service," and serves as a source of information available electronically to managers, employees, and envoys as talking points for person-to-person contacts. The "wire service" information can be used for internal or external publications and presentations.

In addition to compiling and maintaining the information database, the editor serves as a gatekeeper, making sure the information is complete, verified and timely.

The information in the database is used for all public information tools, which ensures the consistency of the quality of information being disseminated to internal and external audiences.

At Fernald, these communication techniques are being developed with the goal of enhancing public involvement and providing accurate and timely feedback to managers.

Although public involvement is the responsibility of program managers, public affairs specialists play an important role. At Fernald each project manager is assigned a public affairs counselor. These counselors draw upon their resources to help managers. They coach, train, and support. They help managers develop communication plans. They use their special communication skills in writing, graphics, video, and meeting facilitation to develop good communication tools for the manager. The counselors play a special role in communicating through the mass media. Most importantly they integrate and coordinate the actions of the many different programs into a single site-wide public involvement program.

Public involvement is not a tidy process. It is not straightforward. There are no guarantees. However, huge public treasure has been lost because public policy was not accepted by the public. It is worth making the effort to use public involvement to discover and build support for a policy that will be accepted. The Fernald experience suggests that it is well worth the effort.

Planning for public involvement begins before a project starts

The DOE site manager and the Public Affairs staff use the information they get from the project plans to develop public involvement activities to support those efforts. They coordinate the many different public involvement demands of the various projects. That way we can avoid duplication or overkill and assure uniform quality. There are some site-wide activities that project managers can take advantage of as they develop their individual plans. The public involvement process will be simpler if project managers can take advantage of these site-wide activities for their own specific communication needs.

As soon as a project or change of direction starts to loom on the horizon, managers should consult with their Public Affairs counselors. When an activity requires public involvement, the Public Affairs counselors will prepare for their technical managers a

communication plan. The communication plans average about 2 to 3 pages and specify the following information:

- Objective
- Audience
- Strategy & Messages
- Methods to deliver and receive messages
- Sensitivities

The Public Affairs counselors also create and maintain project-specific attachments that summarize community concerns. Because public involvement is a dynamic process, these attachments must be frequently updated.