

REPORT

VOLUME 34/NUMBER 4 APRIL 2002

MANAGING COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Community meetings are an important part of the civic decision-making process, but talking with citizens can sometimes be stressful for public officials and agency managers. While enthusiasm, a respectful attitude toward citizens, and good intentions are certainly important, they are rarely enough to ensure civil, effective community meetings. With a more strategic approach and some advance planning, community meetings can be managed to enhance civic debate and avoid unproductive confrontations.

This report presents the fundamental community relations skills needed to handle the challenges associated with both large community meetings and smaller, more private interactions with neighbors. It discusses how to select the best type of community meeting and what you can do ahead of time to minimize possible problems. The report then outlines what to do once the meeting begins and provides detailed how-to instructions for engaging in active listening, dealing with angry citizens, and handling difficult questions.

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VOLUME 34/NUMBER 4
APRIL 2002
ITEM NUMBER 42784

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Managing Community Meetings

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SETTING UP THE MEETING

Local managers, department heads, and other public officials often find themselves hosting community meetings or serving as the star attraction of events sponsored by citizens' groups. Whether serving as host, facilitator, or guest, the public agency team should sit down in advance to discuss what can be done ahead of time to promote the most orderly, productive community meeting possible.

Purpose

When you're the host, the type of meeting you're sponsoring depends on what you're trying to achieve. Keep in mind, however, that your reasons for holding a meeting may be quite different from the reasons citizens have for attending the meeting. If people do not understand or agree on the purpose of the meeting, they are likely to feel angry or cheated when the event doesn't turn out the way they expected it to. The four general types of community meetings are informational, advisory, decision-making, and persuasive.

Informational meetings. Public officials often assume that the primary purpose of a community meeting is to educate citizens about a civic proposal. The underlying assumption is that once people know the "real" facts about the situation, community concerns or controversy will disappear. Making a presentation about new library fees at a neighborhood association meeting or holding an agency workshop to present the results of a consultant's report are classic examples of informational meetings, and these events are often accompanied by the use of tools such as fact sheets, newsletters, advertisements, press releases, and Web sites to convey information.

It is important to appreciate that public information is inherently condescending. The public information approach essentially starts from the position that public managers already know what's best for the community and that citizens have nothing to contribute to the situation. Residents are informed of deci-

sions only after they are made. Asking neighbors to attend a meeting "so we can let you know what's going on" may offend citizens who feel they are being treated in a paternalistic or condescending manner.

Community meetings that are purely informative are more likely to result in confrontation than events at which the public is allowed some meaningful type of participation. When citizens are expected to do nothing except sit and listen, they are likely to challenge what they are hearing simply to justify their own presence at the meeting.

Citizens are likely to feel angry or cheated when a meeting doesn't turn out the way they expected it to.

Even when the primary purpose of a meeting is to disseminate information, try to avoid billing the event as an instructional lecture. Instead stress that it is an advisory meeting where, instead of the city team doing most of the talking, you hope to hear from them.

Advisory meetings. Often citizens don't want you to talk; they want you to listen. Advisory meetings encourage citizen cooperation by asking the question: "What do you think?" After eliciting criticisms, suggestions, and complaints from residents, public officials evaluate the input and then unilaterally accept or reject it. If you want to hear what people think of police-community relations, or if you would like to know what citizens' top priorities are for next year's parks and recreation budget, advisory tools like formal public hearings and public opinion surveys can help get the input you are seeking.

When citizens have taken the time and energy to communicate with you, they can become quite angry if it seems their comments have gone in one ear and out the other. Asking for an opinion doesn't mean you have to agree with it, act on it, or even spend a lot of time discussing it during the meeting. But it does mean that you have to acknowledge that input. Listen carefully to each citizen and then use your own words

Presenting data

People process information in different ways, and your communication style should respond to the cognitive needs of the entire audience.

Many people are **visual thinkers**, meaning they more readily comprehend information they can see in written, pictorial, or graphic form. Visual thinkers often speak quickly and use visual references like "I see," or "Look at this."

Auditory thinkers grasp new ideas best when the ideas are presented verbally. These people are often good listeners and storytellers and use auditory references like "Sounds good," or "Listen to this."

Kinesthetic thinkers process new information in terms of their environment. They want to tour the site, physically hold the report, and touch the sample of carpet proposed for the new community center. Kinesthetic thinkers generally make up the smallest portion of the audience but can be recognized by their slow, methodical speech patterns and their use of tactile or environmental references such as "This is a tough decision," or "Let's get to the bottom of this."

When educating the public is a top priority, carefully consider how people process information and then select the best ways to convey the data. Ideally, your informational presentations will appeal to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic thinkers.

to summarize the speaker's comments. By repeating the citizen's key points, you demonstrate that you understand and respect community concerns and intend to integrate them into decision making.

Decision-making meetings. One of the most important reasons to hold a community meeting is to actively involve members of the public in the decision-making process. In collaborative decision-making meetings, the public participates in defining the problem, identifying alternatives, and recommending the final action. At the same time, agency decision makers commit themselves to incorporating that input to the maximum extent feasible. Common collaborative forums include small, invitation-only groups like citizen advisory committees or task forces and broader, more inclusive interactive planning workshops and design charrettes.¹

Citizens will engage in joint decision making only if they believe that a negotiated settlement will be less risky, less expensive, or less time consuming than arbitration by city hall or the courts. If residents believe they can win a fight in a confrontational forum, there will be little incentive for them to bargain cooperatively. It is also important to keep in mind that stakeholder negotiations are possible only if the local

political system empowers the process. If elected or appointed officials intend to exercise independent judgment without even advisory reference to a settlement reached through joint decision making, then no motive exists for the parties to bargain.

While it is crucial to involve the public in decision making as much as possible, not all decisions can or should be made jointly by all affected stakeholders:

- Demands for secrecy or a quick decision may make joint decision making impractical
- The parties may have already selected representatives to decide on an issue or delegated their own decision-making rights to someone else
- The issue may be too trivial to justify devoting a lot of intensive civic resources
- A group setting is not always the best forum for deciding highly controversial issues. Fear of group criticism may cause stakeholders to repress valid objections or unusual solutions that might be more freely expressed in more private communication with public officials.

Persuasive meetings. Most community meetings involve some aspect of persuasion. Persuasion involves presenting arguments in order to change citizens' beliefs, opinions, or intentions; for example, some persuasion is usually going on when a public official talks about why an upcoming bond issue is important to the community's well-being. Officials might also try to persuade someone to take action consistent with those new attitudes, such as actually voting in favor of the bond measure or writing a letter to the editor in support of it.

Government managers often emphasize rational persuasion and offer facts, data, and logical arguments that they hope neighbors will evaluate and accept. Faced with information overload, however, many citizens rely on peripheral persuasion cues rather than engage in rational evaluation. When relying on peripheral cues, citizens focus on the external context instead of on the internal, rational content of a statement: If the speaker is likable, then the statements must be true. All lawyers lie. If the developer paid for this, it must be a bunch of hogwash. Since everyone seems to hate this proposal, it must be a bad idea.

Parties engaged in heated debate often ignore both rational and peripheral issues and are instead influenced by emotional persuasion. Indeed, emotional appeals are typically used to distract attention away from weak rational arguments. Common emotional appeals include appeals to fear ("We'll sue!"), appeals to pity ("This will kill the little birds that nest in the tree!"), guilt trips ("How could you do this to us?"), and personal attacks ("We know you're in the developer's pocket.").

So what kind of meeting works best? The meeting where all parties agree on its purpose. Before commencing a community meeting, explore everyone's

¹ A charrette is a gathering of various groups of people in a community to resolve common problems with the assistance of outside experts.

expectations about what's going to happen, and be prepared to shift your focus if necessary to meet the public's needs.

Formats

Multiparty events. Multiparty events such as public hearings, neighborhood association meetings, and agency workshops are the most conventional forms of public participation. Seats are usually set out in a theater-style arrangement, a speaker presents information, and a question-and-answer session follows. Multiparty events are notable because any member of the community may attend and any person who attends is permitted to participate.

Multiparty events are best suited for eliciting advice, guidance, and direction from the public. However, enormous community meetings can be quite unproductive if your top goal is to educate, persuade, or engage in joint decision making. It can be difficult to explore ideas in depth at a large event because so many people want to discuss so many issues. Many citizens are intimidated or embarrassed to speak in front of large groups of people, and a huge audience can promote groupthink, where innovative ideas are discouraged and minority opinions are condemned.

If you are hoping for a meeting that is more than purely advisory, consider options other than a mass public meeting: hold a series of smaller meetings or host an open house or community fair that lasts several hours or even several days. If you have a sense of how many people are going to attend the meeting and have adequate staff resources, you can break a large audience into several separate roundtables for more intimate discussion. Field trips also provide opportunities to communicate with citizens in a less formal setting than a conventional multiparty meeting.

Invitational events. Although any interested citizen can attend and participate in a multiparty forum, only a limited number of community members are invited to participate in leadership events such as citizens advisory committees or task forces. A coffee-and-doughnut meeting in a citizen's living room—with a limited number of neighbors asked to participate in a discussion about a civic proposal in a personal, relaxed setting—is another effective type of invitational event. Focus groups are a more formal type of invitational event, with six to ten "average citizens" randomly recruited to participate in a partly structured roundtable discussion led by a trained facilitator.

Bilateral communication. Bilateral discussions give citizens an opportunity to talk to and hear from a public official without the simultaneous presence or comment of other people. Bilateral outreach tools include one-on-one briefings, information hot lines residents can use to call in to talk with a project team member, and staffed informational centers where citizens can drop by to speak individually with an informed agency member.

Unilateral communication. If local government officials are principally interested in listening to neighbors without providing immediate feedback or when they want to gauge citizens' unbiased opinion without exposing them to the opinions of their neighbors, unilateral public input is what is called for. Written comments and citizen testimony at public hearings are classic tools of unilateral public input. Telephone, mail, or Internet surveys are also excellent ways to elicit unilateral opinion, as are direct-mail response cards, telephone hot lines that allow residents to leave recorded messages, and Web pages with e-mail links.

Logistics

Announcement. Citizens typically become aware of community meetings through flyers, advertising, and newspaper notices. The announcement should include the subject matter of discussion and provide details about the meeting location, the date, and the times the meeting will begin and end. Information about public transportation and parking at the meeting site should be included, as well as information about access for the disabled, child care, and translation services.

Room arrangements. Although theater-style seating will accommodate the largest number of people, it is also a relatively confrontational, us-versus-them setup. If you use this format, consider placing a low table in front for speakers rather than using a formal podium, or encourage speakers to walk around the room. If you're trying to accommodate more than a few people at once, you could also consider setting up tables in a U-shape or a horseshoe layout, forming a hollow square or rectangle, setting tables parallel to the front of the room so all participants face the front, or setting tables perpendicular to the front so participants can sit on either side of the table and turn their chairs slightly to face forward.

Roundtables are an excellent way to encourage dialogue and elicit input from less aggressive audience members. A common format is to go over the main issues in a theater-style setting and then break into smaller groups around tables for discussion. You'll need a trained staff member at each table to facilitate conversation, and later you'll need to reconvene as a group to share highlights of each table's discussion.

An open-house format is another productive type of room arrangement. Open houses typically have different stations set up around the room, and each station addresses a separate issue: one table might have a display on potential transportation impacts of a senior center, for example; while the next table might focus on programs and events the senior center will host; and the next table might illustrate how urban design impacts the new center. Each table is staffed by an appropriate expert able to answer citizen questions and elicit and record input on each topic. Although this is both time intensive and resource intensive, an open house can be an effective way to inform the

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public and elicit people's opinions with a relatively low likelihood of aggressive audience behavior.

Agenda. The agenda that is distributed at the community meeting should provide details of the topics to be discussed and, if possible, the expected length of discussion on each item. Again, the start and finish time for the meeting should be prominently noted to make it easier to keep the meeting running on time.

Sign-in lists and name tags can discourage aggressive or antisocial behavior.

Sign-in table and name tags. Set up a staffed table at the door so people who enter can sign in and receive name tags. Not only will this allow you to add citizens to the mailing list for later follow-up, but it will significantly increase the likelihood that participants will engage in civil, cooperative behavior during the meeting. Mob behavior is caused by anonymity; people are more likely to behave in an aggressive or antisocial manner if they think they are faceless members of a crowd. A sign-in table and visible name tags make it easier for citizens to be personally identified and remind participants that they are, in fact, responsible and accountable for their own behavior.

Food and beverages. When people are eating and drinking, they tend to like the people they are with and agree with what they're hearing. Never pass up an opportunity to share snacks with citizens.

AT THE MEETING

Beginning the Meeting

Getting started. If you intend to stop the meeting at the announced time, you need to start the meeting at the announced time. Waiting for latecomers is disrespectful to those audience members who arrived on time and shifts control away from the chairperson and into the hands of absentees. At a minimum, you can deal with some of the meeting formalities—reminders about the need for name tags and directions to the rest rooms—during the first minutes of the meeting.

In many circumstances it is appropriate to commence the community meeting by saluting the American flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. This brief ceremony unites meeting participants in a common activity and helps remind the audience of the civic and civil nature of the meeting.

Introductions. The chair should thank citizens for attending the meeting and introduce each presenter or agency participant. The purpose of this introduction is not only to give each player a personal identity but also to describe the role and authority of each agency participant in the decision-making process. If the audience is not too large, each citizen may be asked to introduce himself or herself, which can also reduce the

risk that those individuals will later engage in aggressive or antisocial conduct.

Ground rules. The chair should review how the meeting will be conducted and get the audience to generally agree on basic rules of conduct. Describe the order of the agenda, how speakers will be called, and how long each speaker will be allowed to talk. Be clear that personal attacks, interruptions, noisy outbursts, and rude behavior will not be tolerated. Remind the audience that even if there's still more to discuss, the meeting will be adjourned at the announced time so citizens who have made child care arrangements can get home on time without missing important civic debate. If someone behaves inappropriately during the meeting, remind the individual of the rules that the audience agreed to at the start of the meeting.

Depending on your personal communication style, you may prefer to focus on the rights of the audience rather than announce a series of prohibitions and penalties for uncivil behavior. Each audience member has the right to hear what's being said, for instance, which means that interruptions, private conversations, and cell-phone calls violate the rights of others. Everyone has the right to express an opinion without worrying about the approval or condemnation of peers, which means that clapping and booing are inappropriate. When someone acts out during the meeting, point out that that individual is interfering with the rights of others and treating the rest of the audience in a disrespectful manner.

Active Listening

The intensity of a citizen's antagonism about a civic proposal often relates directly to how ignored or insulted that person feels. One of the most important functions of a community meeting is to allow citizens to express their outrage and show them that their concerns are understood and respected.

The intensity of a citizen's antagonism about a civic proposal often relates directly to how ignored or insulted that person feels.

When people are trying to discuss a controversial proposal, they often become so wrapped up in what they are saying that they do not really listen to other perspectives. Unless citizens believe that you have listened to their concerns and understood them, they will escalate the volume and intensity of that message until they are certain you can no longer ignore them. Instead of planning what you are going to say next, engage in active listening while a citizen is talking, and then take a moment when the citizen has finished to consider your response or next comment.

Attention. The first step of active listening is paying attention. You demonstrate interest in what is being

said by leaning forward, taking notes, and maintaining good eye contact. Verbal indicators of attention include brief interjections that show you are really listening: "Oh," "I see," "Uh-huh." You can also ask occasional questions to show sincere interest and an effort to understand the speaker's ideas. Make certain you don't cover your mouth with your hand while listening, which sends signals that you dislike the speaker or disagree with what you're hearing.

Understanding. When you're engaged in active listening, what are you listening for? Besides listening to the most obvious aspect of the citizen's comments—the spoken words—listen for any less-obvious clues or the underlying meaning of those words:

- What emotions are being expressed by the words, body language, vocal pace, or tone?
- What factual assumptions is the citizen making? Statements that might seem outrageous are often based on some kind of factual assumption or logical rationale that may merit closer consideration.
- What does the resident hope to achieve by saying these things? Is the citizen trying to inform you? Seek information? Advise you? Persuade you? Is the speaker trying to obtain some sign of respect from you? To impress the audience? Recognizing the speaker's needs helps you react when it's your turn to talk.

Reflecting back. Simply allowing a neighbors' words to resonate on your eardrums isn't enough. You must make it clear that you really understand what's been said. Before trying to make any substantive response or advance your own position, pause a couple of seconds to make sure the citizen is finished speaking. If so, then reflect back what you've heard. When you reflect back, you use your own words to summarize your understanding of what the speaker wants or believes. By reflecting back the citizen's underlying need, you show that you understand community concerns and intend to respect them. Common reflecting phrases include:

- "It sounds like..."
- "You feel like..."
- "You're saying that..."
- "You're upset because..."
- "I appreciate that...."

Acknowledge the outrage neighbors may feel: "I can see you're upset that no one from the township called you before the trees were cut down." "I understand your concern over media reports about a possible tax increase."

You don't have to agree with the other person's emotional response, but you can show empathy and comprehension simply by restating the emotions expressed.

Enhance your credibility

Even when you are absolutely truthful, many listeners concentrate less on what you're saying than on how you're saying it and come to the incorrect conclusion that you are not being honest. That's why it's important to avoid nonverbal signals that could inadvertently suggest you're being less than truthful.

Honest speakers make a lot of eye contact. In fact, speakers rated by listeners as "sincere" engage in three times more eye contact than "insincere" speakers. In an excessive effort to avoid looking shifty, liars will often maintain an unnatural stare that simply lasts too long. Because unbroken eye contact can make other people feel anxious, blink or glance away from your counterpart in a natural manner. On the other hand, don't go overboard in your desire to avoid a glassy stare. While truth-telling adults blink approximately 15 times per minute, Richard Nixon blinked up to 40 times per minute during the first Watergate press conference.

People who are telling the truth typically keep their hands relaxed and their palms exposed; people who are lying often conceal the palms of their hands. Covering your mouth while talking suggests lying, and covering your mouth while listening means you dislike what you're hearing. It's always a good idea to keep your hands away from your face in stressful situations.

There really is something called the Pinocchio syndrome. Stress can cause delicate nerves in the face to tingle, so you can send inadvertent signals of dishonesty by rubbing your eyes, scratching your nose, or stroking your chin while speaking. Again, keep your hands away from your face.

The same nervous-system response that makes your nose itch can also change the consistency of saliva. A highly aroused (or dishonest) speaker often has a dry mouth and may frequently lick her lips, swallow, or clear her throat when speaking. Keep a glass of water on hand when you're making a stressful presentation.

Making Eye Contact

Making good eye contact while listening and speaking shows you are interested in what other people think and concerned that your own comments are understood. Fortunately eye contact is relatively easy to control; that's important because you are more likely to come across as caring, sincere, likable, and trustworthy if you engage in good eye contact.

What constitutes good eye contact? Consider three things. First, where do you physically aim your eyeballs? Second, how long should each glance last? Finally, how much time should you spend engaging in eye contact?

For starters, most people use only their right eye to look at another person, and they use only their left eye for depth perception. Good eye contact involves using your right eye to look intently into the right eye

of the other person. To test this theory, use your left eye to look into the left eye of another person. Feels awkward, doesn't it? This bit of trivia also explains why you should always wear your name tag on your right shoulder: people should be able to easily shift their glance downward from your right eye to read your name without looking across your body to search for the tag on your left shoulder.

Select one person from the audience and establish eye contact with that individual. Hold that gaze until you shift eye contact to another audience member. If you cannot look at each and every person in the room, then at least make eye contact with every section of the audience: the front and the back of the room, the sides, people who are standing as well as people who are sitting. We naturally prefer to look at friendly folks who are nodding and smiling at us, but you can reduce the chance of a hostile outbreak by making eye contact with people who appear to be unfriendly.

How long should each glance last? When two people are simultaneously gazing into each other's eyes, the average eye-to-eye contact lasts a bit more than a second. When one person is looking at the other without reciprocal eye contact, the glance lasts about three seconds. Eye contact that lasts too long can send inadvertent messages of aggression or sexual attraction, with gazes longer than 10 seconds giving rise to extreme stress.

Overall, how much eye contact should you make during a meeting? The average speaker makes eye contact 40 percent of the time while talking, although a speaker trying to come across as really honest or powerful often engages in more frequent eye contact. The average listener looks at the other person somewhere between 60 and 75 percent of the time while listening. A very powerful person will make less eye contact when listening to a subordinate, while a less powerful person might engage in almost continuous eye contact while listening.

ANGRY AUDIENCES

Angry citizens are not an inevitable part of the public decision-making process. Public officials can use a variety of audience management strategies to avoid negative emotions, prevent angry behavior, and calm down a crowd that's getting too agitated.

Don't Make 'em Mad

Anger is always a symptom of underlying negative emotions: people are always angry about something else. The negative situations most likely to trigger audience anger are frustration, humiliation, and unpleasant meeting conditions.

Frustration. When people think they have been unfairly prevented from getting what they want, they get frustrated; and when they get frustrated, they get

angry. Frustration arises when citizens want something—a stop sign installed or a building permit issued without a long wait—and they cannot achieve that goal because some external obstacle—often a government agency or public official—is in the way.

Anger is always a symptom of another underlying negative emotion.

Large community meetings can often involve a lot of frustration. Most neighbors show up at meetings expecting to speak to both the agency and their peers in the audience. Too often, however, citizens get stuck listening to other people and waiting for their own turn to speak. You can minimize the sense of frustration and resulting anger by making certain that participants have realistic expectations about how the meeting will run: "The planning director and county budget director will each take 10 minutes to talk about why we have to cut the planning budget and what this will mean, and then we'd like to hear from you."

Neighbors are less likely to feel angry when they understand their frustration is not the result of unfair or arbitrary action. That's why it's important to give an explanation when you are granting or being granted special rights: "I said I would call on people in the order they raised their hands, but I'm going to let these parents speak out of order so they can take their sick baby home."

Humiliation. People get angry when they feel ignored, insulted, manipulated, or made to look ridiculous. The result? Aggressive behavior as the humiliated person tries to repair an injured self-image or enhance a damaged social image. While it is always important to treat neighbors respectfully, it is especially necessary to do so in potentially volatile situations. Your goal is to make sure no one loses face.

Meeting conditions. Holding a community meeting in the wrong place can contribute to unnecessary stress. People are much more likely to feel angry when exposed to unpredictable noise, strange music, high temperatures, or unpleasant smells such as cigarette smoke. Intense crowding or the violation of citizens' personal space can also lead to stress and resulting anger, so make sure your room is big enough when you're expecting a big turnout.

Negative signals. How can you tell if the audience is experiencing negative emotions? Someone who is in a bad mood will often display an obvious and reliable signal of his feelings: he will cover his mouth with his hand while listening. When you're talking to an audience and suddenly see a bunch of hands go up as neighbors try to hide their lips, change your communications approach or change subjects immediately. By the way, this signal is a two-way street: be sure you're not inadvertently communicating your own negative emotions by covering your lips when listening to residents.

Prevent Aggressive Behavior

Just because someone feels angry doesn't necessarily mean that person must behave in an angry manner. You can take several steps to encourage cooperative conduct even when emotions are running high.

Set ground rules. Take a few moments at the beginning of the meeting to set some ground rules, which typically include prohibitions on shouting, interruptions, profanity, or personal insults. Detail the procedure and timing for audience questions or comments. Depending on the circumstances, you might want to briefly engage the audience in defining the rules and then post the rules at the front of the room.

Maintain eye contact. It is obviously easier to lash out at a faceless enemy than to attack someone with whom one has a personal relationship; this is why emotional citizens will often try to avoid eye contact with you. If you can personally interact with audience members by making eye contact, you can significantly decrease the chances of being treated in an uncivil manner.

Eliminate anonymity. Because people are more likely to engage in aggressive conduct when they think they're anonymous members of the crowd, you can minimize antisocial behavior by making it easier to identify individuals and holding them personally responsible for their actions. Use name tags. Put out a sign-up sheet. Call on citizens by name. Have speakers stand up and identify themselves before they offer a comment or question.

You can further encourage people to see themselves as autonomous individuals by using rhetorical questions that enhance introspection and by urging people to think about their own personal experiences and private standards of good and bad.

When Things Get Hot

Despite your best efforts, you could find a community meeting degenerating into an emotional and angry scene. Various strategies can be used to calm an angry crowd.

Enforcement. Remind an angry citizen that the audience collectively established ground rules at the beginning of the meeting and that negative behavior isn't acceptable to you or to the speaker's peers in the audience.

Venting. Rather than try to stifle furious feelings, you could choose to allow an angry person let off steam. It might help to encourage people to express their emotions before you try to address their substantive concerns. You might even want to ask for more ("Can you give me some specific examples?"). Further complaints should then no longer take the form of an irrational attack; instead you should be able to expect a rational and cooperative response to your request for more input.

Disagreeing without disrespect

How do you indicate that you disagree with someone without causing that person to lose face? You do it by acknowledging the value of the speaker's opinion while you're expressing your different opinion, or by signalling your respect for the citizen's ability to consider other viewpoints fairly:

- "I don't think we see eye to eye on this issue, but at least the audience can now consider both our points of view."
- "I don't quite see it that way, and let me explain why."
- "You have some interesting points, but many other people feel a bit differently."
- "In theory what you're saying makes sense, but consider this..."

Impact on audience. Emotional citizens often engage in nasty behavior in order to punish public officials, but you can bring the power of peer pressure into play by pointing out that nasty behavior is actually hurting other members of the audience: "When people interrupt me while I'm speaking, it makes it difficult for other members of the audience to understand what I'm talking about."

Point out that nasty behavior is hurting other members of the audience.

Partial agreement. You can often dispense with a furious tirade simply by agreeing with a small part of it. You might agree on facts ("Yes, I said we're closing the street for a week."), or accept one element of the attack while denying another ("Yes, I just started working for the city last month, but that doesn't mean that I'm lying.").

Attack attacks. In some circumstances you may consider attacking the use of attacks. First, show that you understand the substantive content of the attack by reflecting back what you've heard ("I understand that you don't want the new bus stop near your business,..."). Next, comment on the inappropriate manner in which the comment was presented ("but you don't need to call me names to get me to appreciate your concern."). A word of caution: while attacking the use of attacks can neutralize the impact of an angry individual on the rest of the audience and discourage other people from behaving aggressively, the target of your counterattack is going to feel shamed by the public rebuke and will probably feel even more angry.

Apologize. Even when an attack is without merit, offering an apology may be the easiest way to allow your critic to withdraw without losing face.

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DEALING WITH QUESTIONS

Hostile Questions

Communication between public officials and citizens often occurs in the form of questions and answers during community meetings. Ideally, this interaction allows neighbors to learn more about proposed actions that affect them and allows officials to learn more about residents' concerns. Too often, however, a productive question-and-answer session degenerates into personal and substantive attacks merely masquerading as questions. Fortunately, you can take several steps to handle hostile questions effectively.

Look away from the speaker. Americans are taught that, when giving an answer, it's polite to look at the person who asked the question. In a group setting, however, this respectful eye contact keeps the spotlight on the speaker, reaffirms that individual's leadership position, and encourages aggressive follow-up questions. Moreover, maintaining eye contact with the questioner while ignoring the rest of the audience suggests that other people do not deserve the same personal attention or that the subject matter isn't of interest to anyone else.

The key to defusing a hostile question is to shift attention away from the individual who asked the question. When someone lobbs an aggressive comment or question at you, immediately shift eye contact away from the speaker and address your response to the rest of the audience. Treating every participant equally reduces the emotional rewards to be gained by attention-seeking activists and avoids reinforcing the impression that the toughest critic deserves special deference. Don't look back at the questioner when you're giving the answer, and don't finish up by asking "Does that answer your question?" unless you really want a follow-up question.

Restate the question. At the same time that you look away from the hostile questioner, restate the question. Restating the question serves several purposes. First, it removes the spotlight from the questioner, who will be more inclined to sit down quietly rather than continue standing while audience attention is focused on you. All members of the audience may not have heard the question, and your restatement helps enlighten those who may not have been listening carefully. Finally, restating the question gives you a few extra moments to come up with a good answer.

Rather than simply reiterating an inflammatory question or negative comment word for word, it may be better to rephrase it in a more positive or less emotional way. When a critic snaps, "Why are you insisting on building this ridiculous community center where no one wants it," shift eye contact and rephrase the central inquiry: "The question is, how did we select this site for the new community center?"

Instead of offering a direct restatement or rephrased question, you might offer an entirely unrelated inquiry: "That question raises a number of

issues, which we should look at piece by piece." or "Before we go on to that topic, let's go back to something Mrs. Garcia said a few minutes ago." Other common transitions used to redirect attention include:

- "Another related question is..."
- "What we should be asking ourselves is..."
- "The real issue is..."
- "A more important issue to consider is..."
- "Another thing is...."

Respond to the question. When someone asks you a question, you have several different response strategies to consider:

- You can give a minimum response to the literal question, without offering any elaboration or additional comment ("We met with the city attorney on Tuesday."). Your minimum response might also include some reinforcement or agreement with the questioner ("Yes, you're right, we did meet with the city attorney on Tuesday.").
- You can respond and insert, answering the specific inquiry and then adding additional information not called for in the question ("We met with the city attorney on Tuesday, and she advised us that it is illegal to discriminate against people based on how much money they earn.").
- You can respond to content without specifically answering the question that was asked ("We have been advised that it would be illegal to exclude people from this new housing just because they're not wealthy.").
- You can ignore the question or address an entirely different, substitute inquiry ("We've met with a lot of people to discuss this issue.").
- You can refuse to answer the question either because the topic is off-limits ("I'm not going to answer questions about the finances of each prospective resident.") or because the issue has already been addressed ("I've already answered that so I'm not going to repeat myself.").

Interruptions

Public officials are often interrupted by citizens with questions or comments they feel can't wait. Instead of presenting information in a logical manner, you find yourself dribbling it out as defensive answers to hostile questions.

A natural response might be to simply instruct citizens that their questions have to wait: "I'll answer you when I'm done talking." Unfortunately, this response fails to acknowledge the legitimate right of residents to ask questions and sends the message that what you have to say is more important than what citizens want to hear. When neighbors insist that you

answer their questions now, your response should include several different elements.

First of all, acknowledge that citizens have questions that you intend to answer: "I see a lot of people with their hands raised, and I want to make sure I answer everyone's questions." Next, indicate how you intend to respond to questions: "I think that the 5-minute presentation I have can answer a lot of your concerns, and then I'll take questions from the audience for 30 minutes." This announcement helps establish control of the situation and makes it easier for audience members to wait their turn without getting impatient. If you don't want the audience to have to wait a long time for an answer, you can give a very brief response and defer a fuller explanation: "The short answer is no, this won't increase your sewer rates; but the director of public works can give you the details about the new rate plan in a few minutes." Finally, ask citizens to endorse your proposal for handling questions: "I hope this is okay with you."

What do you do if several people want to ask questions at once? Acknowledge that each individual has a question, assign a number to each person, and then call on each citizen in turn.

Questions That Won't Start

One of the most awkward parts of a community meeting can be that moment when you invite questions from the audience and no one says anything. Don't bring your presentation to a screeching halt with, "Does anyone have questions?" Instead, use your closing comments to recap key messages and encourage listeners to focus on substantive issues: "Does anyone have questions about how this new intersection will help keep traffic moving?" If you don't get any takers, fill the void by introducing a question that allows you to repeat a key message: "A lot of citizens have asked me about..." or "One of the most frequent questions I hear about this proposal is..."

The Speaker Who Won't Stop

Sometimes a talkative individual rises during a community meeting and proceeds to monopolize debate. Interactive discussion with the group breaks down to one-on-one grilling by the activist while constituents look on. Inflamed audience members encourage persistent interrogation while less-aggressive citizens who are reluctant to interrupt the speaker fade away from the discussion.

A good way to expand the debate is to identify an issue raised by the speaker and then use that key word to shift attention to another citizen. Pick a phrase from the speaker's comments and use that to refer the discussion to someone else: "Hmmm, cost overruns. Mr. McDonald, what are your thoughts on cost overruns?" An attempt by the activist to recover the spotlight will no longer appear as an attack on the public officials but as an attempt to cut off input from Mr. McDonald

and other citizens in the audience. Other strategies that go far to avoid domination of the meeting by one speaker include calling on well-known activists first to let them have their say right up front, postponing overly talkative individuals by calling on them last, or proceeding methodically around the room.

CONCLUSION

While community meetings can often involve citizen agitation and staff stress, these are neither inevitable nor unmanageable. Through a strategic approach and some advance planning, civic managers, department heads, and other public officials can help ensure that community meetings are both civil and productive.

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Volume 34 / Number 4
April 2002