

# COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING: A KEY TO PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE OF REMEDIAL ACTION PROJECTS

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## ABSTRACT

A formal training program in public communication was designed and implemented on the U.S. Department of Energy's Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) Project in 1990. The program is part of the Project's public information/public participation effort, and was designed to train managers and technical staff in the skills needed to manage presentations at public meetings and handle interviews with the news media. The basic workshop incorporated adult learning theory in the design and used videotaping and playback as a key learning tool. In addition, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was used as an awareness builder to enhance recognition of potential barriers to communications with external publics. The program is supported by follow-up coaching in preparation for specific meetings. Preliminary response indicates success in terms of program acceptance and application of skills in the field.

## INTRODUCTION

When the U.S. Congress in 1978 charged the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) with cleaning up tailings at 24 abandoned uranium mill sites around the country, they also mandated that the public be informed about project plans and activities and that the public be provided with opportunities to participate in the planning process. This congressional mandate is highly appropriate for a project which affects public health and welfare, entails the expenditure of tax dollars, and involves private as well as public properties. At the same time, the requirement places a heavy communication burden on the DOE managers of the Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) Project and their technical and remedial action contractors.

As the UMTRA Project progressed through its early stages, experience with public meetings and media interviews made it apparent that managers cast in these public communication roles needed the support of a communication training program. Initially, a commercially available outside program was used. Further experience, however, suggested that ongoing support would be more effective in providing continual improvement in Project public communication. The Technical Assistance Contractor (TAC) brought on a Communication Training Specialist to provide training and ongoing coaching for Project managers and technical staff in preparation for public meetings and media interviews.

In this paper we present factors leading to the decision to use an in-house Communication Training Specialist, the key elements in the design of the initial public communication workshop, an outline of the workshop itself, a discussion of the participant evaluation of the workshop, evidence of program success in the field, and the planned follow-up to the original workshop.

## BACKGROUND

The UMTRA Project mission requires frequent, complex communication between UMTRA Project team members and various external publics, and between the UMTRA Project and other government agencies. Effectiveness of communication can significantly increase internal and external understanding of the UMTRA Project mission and can increase the efficiency with which the project mission is accomplished.

Public Law 95-604, the Uranium Mill Tailings Radiation Control Act of 1978 (UMTRCA), contains several provisions which require an active and ongoing communication role in the execution of the UMTRA Project mission. Together with the 1988 Amendments to the Act, UMTRCA requires that DOE carry out uranium mill tailings remediation in cooperation with state and tribal governments, in compliance with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations, with Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) approval, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and with public participation.

These requirements mean that UMTRA Project managers and technicians are required to communicate regularly with the public and its representatives one-on-one, in small group meetings, in public meetings, and with the news media. The subjects of communication (radiation hazards, costs, and schedules among others) are often sensitive or controversial. For that reason, the effectiveness of communication can significantly impact the efficiency, effectiveness, and cost of remediation. Insensitivity to local, state, or tribal issues can create unnecessary opposition and delays. Effective communication, resulting in governmental, regulatory, and public support can facilitate implementation of the technical side of the remediation program.

The value of effective communication has become increasingly apparent as the UMTRA Project has matured. Early approaches to public communication employed many

of the same approaches as those in use on the project today. However, the effectiveness of early communications depended to a great degree on the communications abilities of the management and technical personnel involved. Since the inception of the project's public information/public participation (PIPP) program, PIPP staff have continually emphasized the importance of preparation in advance of public communications opportunities. Until recently, however, no formal, ongoing program for communications training existed.

Factors influencing the decision by project management to support an ongoing communications training program were derived from recognition of the implications of ineffective communications on public acceptance of project initiatives. Experiences at UMTRA Project sites during 1988 and 1989 demonstrated the importance of public understanding of the complex issues associated with remedial action planning. In some cases, delays in implementation of remedial action construction activities could be directly attributed to the level of understanding achieved between project officials and the public. In February 1990, the DOE directed that a communicationstraining program be initiated to improve the quality of project public communications and thus increase the likelihood of public acceptance of future project activities.

Creation of the UMTRA Project Communications Training program was consistent with DOE's Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Five-Year Plan mandate which includes a "...commitment to open, candid public communication and compliance with environmental laws and regulations."<sup>1</sup> The plan specifies changing DOE culture to meet this commitment. Meeting this commitment requires training in communication skills. Training in communication and presentation skills can also increase UMTRA Project productivity by improving interagency and intercompany coordination on the project team.

#### COMMUNICATION TRAINING DESIGN

To address the need to provide training in effective public communication skills for DOE and Technical Assistance Contractor (TAC) Site Managers, the workshop entitled "Communicating for UMTRA Project Success" was developed during 1990 and delivered for the first time on October 24-25, 1990, with 11 participants attending. The workshop was designed to improve public presentation skills and the ability to handle media interviews. The workshop was well-received by participants and appears to have increased the overall effectiveness of UMTRA Project public communication.

The first step in design of the training program was an informal needs assessment, which included analysis of documents relating to previous communication training programs, observation of communication in meetings with

other agencies and with the public, review of media coverage of specific sites, and interviews with DOE and contractor managers and technical staff. Based on this assessment, the decision was made to focus the initial workshop on two major areas, communication in public meetings and communication with the news media, principally television.

Effective communication in public meetings requires a number of specific communication skills. It requires an understanding of the diversity of personality types involved in the public communication situation. Specifically, the DOE environmental restoration culture, by the nature of the work required, tends to attract individuals with particular personality types. People who attend public meetings are likely to comprise a wider diversity of types than are represented on the DOE side of the picture. An awareness of these differences significantly increases the ability of DOE and contractor personnel to communicate effectively with the public.

To address this issue, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was used to both increase the sensitivity of workshop participants to audience diversity and create a strong initial involvement in the workshop process. The MBTI is a value-neutral personality assessment instrument which has been well validated over several decades of use.

Based on the informal needs assessment, it was postulated that the UMTRA Project managers, by virtue of the personal preference expressed in the selection of technical careers, would tend to have a preference for rational, objective decision making rather than value or feeling based decision making. Given the probability of a high proportion of value-based decision makers in most public meeting audiences, this was identified as a potential major barrier to effective communication in meetings between the UMTRA Project managers and publics in communities where Project sites are located. The MBTI is a powerful vehicle for raising awareness of the differing decision making styles and of the importance of addressing the needs and concerns of individuals with differing styles.

The MBTI is also an effective tool for engaging participants interactively in a workshop because it provides personal insight. The MBTI was judged particularly appropriate for the UMTRA Project management and technical staff group because it is a complex and well validated instrument. It was believed that this instrument would work particularly well with a group that was technically inclined. To support this element of the workshop, an organizational psychologist was hired to administer and score the MBTI and to present the scores and theoretical context during the workshop.

Other skills required include abilities to communicate emotional as well as factual issues, organize material in an oral communication format, use the full range of oral com-

munication skills (gestures, voice control, pacing), and handle difficult questions effectively.

Communicating with and through the news media requires a related but different set of skills. To communicate effectively with the news media, spokespersons must understand the differing needs of various news media (newspapers, television, and radio). They must particularly be aware of the risks and opportunities in television interviews and know how to handle particular types of treacherous questions. They must recognize the importance of clear, tightly formulated messages.

In addition to content considerations, the workshop was developed to incorporate the key concepts of adult learning theory. Adults learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process, when they have the opportunity to interact in small groups with peers, and when they can see the immediate application of theory to real world situations.

To accommodate these needs of adult learners, the workshop was designed to be interactive from start to finish. Small group and individual exercises were included in all modules of the workshop. Examples and cases were debriefed to make concepts clear and relate theory to the real world. Most importantly, participants were provided opportunities to practice skills while being videotaped. Videotape playback offered opportunities for self and peer evaluation.

The manner in which videotaping and playback was incorporated into workshop design was considered to be important to workshop success. Videotape/playback is a particularly powerful learning tool for skills which can be easily observed such as athletic skills and oral presentation skills. However, the technique can be threatening and can create defensiveness which hinders learning if it is used inappropriately. Most important to the successful use of the video playback is creation of a supportive, nonthreatening environment. To help create this environment, several steps were taken.

First, a short section of the workshop was devoted to establishing ground rules for giving feedback. This workshop section was developed to establish both receptivity to constructive feedback and skills at providing specific, descriptive feedback in a supportive manner. The second component in creation of a supportive environment was the sequence of steps in the videotape/playback/critique exercises. The exercise began with the instructor modelling the sequence. Participants then made individual presentations while being videotaped. The presentation was played back for the entire group. The individual was then first provided the opportunity for self critique. Other workshop participants were then provided the opportunity to offer additional suggestions. Finally, the workshop instructors

offered any additional suggestions. Feedback was structured to include supporting comments as well as suggestions for improvement.

A second type of videotaped exercise was used in the media training portion of the workshop. This exercise was designed to create the experience of a television interview. To create that experience, a professional video cameraman with broadcast television experience was used. In addition, a former member of the news media with electronic journalism experience was brought in to conduct simulated interviews. The key to the success of this module of the workshop was the experience of these outside resources.

## COACHING

One-shot training has little effect when it is not tied to an ongoing program of support. On the UMTRA Project, the public communication workshop was conceived as an integral part of a program which includes individual coaching for managers and technical staff when they prepare for public presentations. This support includes a dry run as well as whatever individual preparation assistance is requested.

## STRUCTURE OF THE ORIGINAL WORKSHOP

At the time of the design of the original workshop, the UMTRA Project management and staff were facing heavy training requirement in other areas, notably health and safety, and were under pressure of multiple tight deadlines. To accommodate those schedule pressures, the workshop was designed as a two-day program. The following modules made up the communication workshop:

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| Module 1: | The "You" in Communication -- This module included the presentation of MBTI assessment results. The instrument itself was self-administered by participants prior to the workshop date and scored before the workshop.<br><br>Individual scores were presented to the individual participants, while aggregated data were presented in a form to help participants recognize the distinctive distribution of types represented in the workshop group. Results were presented with a focus on implications for personal communication style.<br>Time: 1 hour. |
| Module 2: | Effective Feedback -- This module developed skills at giving non-threatening feedback on role plays and exercises.<br>Time: 30 min.  |
| Module 3: | People and Politics -- This module was designed to help participants develop   |



sensitivity to the broad context in which UMTRA operates. It addressed the political, community, and regulatory contexts of UMTRA Project activities and communications. Time: 1.5 hours.

- Module 4: **Knowing your Audience** -- This module was designed to develop awareness of audience factors which must be considered in preparing a presentation. It provided a structure for audience analysis. Time: 1 hour.
- Module 5: **Making your Presentation** -- This module presented techniques for developing effective public meeting presentations. It addressed how to develop an oral presentation, design of audiovisual aids, and presentation style. It included exercises and practice with video playback. Time: 6 hours.
- Module 6: **The Gentle Art of Q & A** -- This module included skills for anticipating difficult questions, and managing conflict in public meetings. Time: 2 hours.
- Module 7: **Meeting the Media** -- This module introduced participants to the various news media and their different styles and needs. It presented techniques for preparing for difficult types of interviews. Videotape feedback was used. Time: 4 hours.

#### EVALUATIONS AND FIELD APPLICATIONS

Workshop participants were asked to complete an end-of-workshop evaluation following the workshop. The survey instrument was intended to be administered in the workshop and collected prior to departure of participants. Because the workshop ran somewhat overtime the second day, participants were instead asked to return the survey during the following work day. Six of the eleven participants submitted completed survey instruments. Though a higher proportion of responses was desired, the structured survey responses mirror closely the oral feedback which was received at the end of the second workshop day.

Overall, the workshop was well-received by participants, with all respondents rating it good or better and 66.7 percent rating it excellent. The incorporation of adult learning theory, use of the MBTI, and creation of a supportive environment for video playback exercises were considered key to workshop success.

Some survey respondents felt that the workshop sections covering "The 'You' in Communication," "Effective Feedback," and "Knowing Your Audience" could be short-

ened. The designer concurs with this suggestion. In addition, the section on "People and Politics" could be combined with the section on "Making Your Presentation." Participants also felt that more time for videotaping and playback was desirable.

Because other workshop elements could not be sufficiently shortened to provide the additional on-camera time needed, it is believed that the range of topics and skills needed requires a minimum of three days to cover. On-camera exercises are inherently time-intensive. They are also very powerful learning experiences because they involve participants in all phases of the learning cycle (observing, analyzing, theory building, and application). A redesign of the workshop is currently in consideration which would separate the meeting presentation skills training from the media spokesperson training, allowing two days for the former and one day for the latter. The second workshop would be separated from the first by about a month.

#### FOLLOW-UP COACHING AND DRY RUNS

Members of the PIPP staff have worked on several presentations for public meetings and/or media interviews with workshop participants since the workshop. It is the subjective observation of the staff that coaching/dry run sessions are more effective as a result of the workshop.

Graduates of the workshop appear to value the preparation time more highly and to be more receptive to feedback from coaches. This is believed to be the result of several factors: the awareness-building components of the workshop; the establishment of a shared conceptual base; and the development of a rapport between the instructors and participants.

Feedback from public meetings in Gunnison, Colorado, where sensitive groundwater risk assessment results were presented, and Mexican Hat, Utah, and from a media briefing in Lowman, Idaho, also indicate that preparations for those public contacts have resulted in positive public and media response. Positive public comments have specifically mentioned portions of presentations which were strengthened or changed during dry run and coaching sessions.

#### COMMUNICATION TRAINING REFINEMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Based on experience and feedback from the original workshop delivered in October 1990 and on subsequent public meetings, refinements to the workshop and follow-up training are now under consideration. It has been observed that there can be a tendency to underestimate the number of personnel, particularly in technical areas, who may have a role in public meetings and presentations. This may relate to the focus of some commercially available workshops to combine presentation skills and media spokesperson training. Selection criteria then tend to become focused on the

media communication role. Generally, fewer individuals will be placed in the media spokesperson role than in the public meeting presentation role. Separation of presentation skills training and media spokesperson training can remove this problem.

Training in the skills needed for effective public presentations is now being proposed as a separate two-day workshop. Trainees for this workshop should be selected based on a clear set of criteria. It is important that individuals who may be in such public communication roles receive the training in advance of preparation for actual meetings. The training establishes a foundation which improves the ability of participants to benefit from coaching and dry runs for specific meetings. Generally, a remedial action project should benefit by providing this training opportunity to managers and staff who may be in any of the following roles:

- speaking before any external audience which could impact project success,
- speaking or answering questions at a public meeting,
- making presentations before other DOE groups or other Federal agencies which could influence budgets or program support,
- making presentations to state or tribal groups,
- assisting others to prepare for the above roles.

Participants in the October 24-25 workshop expressed interest in follow-up training. Follow-up sessions can provide opportunities for participants to reinforce and extend their skills. Presentation skills require ongoing development. Most of the participants in the workshop have opportunities to make public presentations and handle question and answer sessions less frequently than would be optimal to maintain continuous skill development.

Follow-up sessions will offer the following benefits:

- extension of basic concepts introduced in the original training,
- introduction of more advanced presentation skills,
- continued development of a set of shared concepts to enhance overall preparation of project teams for public communication opportunities, and
- opportunities to practice skills in a less threatening environment.

As follow-up to the October 24-25 workshop, a one-day session has been proposed on managing question and answer sessions in public meetings. The one-day follow-up session would provide the opportunity for participants to practice the skills of answering tough questions while maintaining control of the meeting. This is the most difficult part of managing a public meeting. The workshop would also allow practice of techniques for handling different types of meetings, such as presentations before local government

bodies where meeting control is in the hands of other individuals.

Our proposed revision of the basic public communication curriculum results in two workshops as outlined below.

### **WORKSHOP I: PUBLIC COMMUNICATION THROUGH MEETINGS**

The duration of this workshop will be two days, and it will focus on the skills needed to make effective presentations at public meetings, handle questions and answers in the meeting, and maintain control of the meeting. It will include these modules:

**Module 1:** The "You" in Communication - This module is built around the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), as in the original workshop design. Time: 1.5 hours.

**Module 2:** Understanding Your Audience - This module will offer tools and concepts for analyzing the audience in order to more effectively target presentations. Concepts established in this module will serve as building blocks for subsequent modules. Time: 1 hour.

**Module 3:** Preparing Your Message - This module addresses the steps in preparing an effective public presentation. It builds on the previous two modules, and takes participants through each step in the presentation process. Throughout this module, participants work on refining their own presentation which they will be delivering on video camera the second day. The module addresses techniques for handling both content and presentation style (emphasis, voice control, and gestures). It also covers effective use of visual aids, with an emphasis on overheads, the most commonly used visual aids. Time: 5.5 hours.

**Module 4:** Meeting the Public - This module provides an opportunity for each participant to make a presentation before the group. The presentation will be videotaped. Participants will have an opportunity for self-critique as well as to receive feedback from other participants and workshop leaders and coaches. Time: 4 hours.

**Module 5:** The Art of the Q & A - This module will present skills for anticipating and preparing for questions, easy and

difficult, which are likely to arise in a public meeting. It will also identify particular types of difficult questions and provide strategies for handling those types of questions. It will emphasize basic methods for maintaining control of the meeting environment in potentially adversarial situations. Participants will have the opportunity to practice handling tough questions on camera. Time: 4 hours.

## **WORKSHOP II: COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE NEWS MEDIA**

The duration of this workshop is one day, and it will focus on the skills needed to communicate effectively in interviews with the news media. Differences between types of media (newspapers, radio, and television) will be presented. An emphasis will be placed on preparing for television interviews and on handling the kinds of questions which present particular risks in a television interview. This workshop will include the following modules:

- Module 1: Studio Interviews - This module will place participants in a mock studio interview situation. An experienced media interviewer will simulate a friendly in-studio interview. Interviews will be recorded on videotape and played back for self critique followed by feedback from other participants, instructors, and coaches. Time: 4 hours.
- Module 2: In Your Face - This module will place participants in a stand-up interview such as might occur before or after a public meeting. A variety of risky questioning techniques will be used to

provide participants with an opportunity to practice response strategies to defuse the risk in the questions. Interviews will be videotaped by a videographer experienced in television news techniques. Playback and feedback procedures similar to those in the other videotaped sessions will be used. Time: 4 hours.

## **CONCLUSION**

Environmental restoration and remedial action programs such as the UMTRA Project are highly visible to public scrutiny. Managers and staff with technical training may be at a disadvantage despite high levels of technical competence if they are not provided the opportunity to develop public communication skills. Development of the ability to present sensitive issues effectively in public, on the other hand, can enhance the effectiveness of a remedial action program. On the UMTRA Project, a public communication training program has been implemented and is being refined to provide ongoing development of effective public communication skills among managers and technical staff with public communication roles. Development of these skills is essential if DOE managers are to implement the policy of open communication.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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1. U.S. Department of Energy, Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Five-Year Plan, DOE/S-0070, Washington, D.C. (1990), pp. 6-7.