

**LESSONS LEARNED WHILE ATTEMPTING TO SIMULTANEOUSLY MAXIMIZE  
THE EFFECTIVENESS AND THE AUTONOMY OF THE IDAHO NATIONAL  
ENGINEERING AND ENVIRONMENTAL LABORATORY  
CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD**

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**ABSTRACT**

In 1994, the Department of Energy (DOE) chartered the Environmental Management (EM) Site Specific Advisory Board (SSAB) to provide independent consensus advice regarding the cleanup program at twelve DOE sites around the country. The Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL) Citizens Advisory Board is comprised of 15 citizens from diverse perspectives from various locations around the state of Idaho. By design, the CAB is comprised of people with limited site knowledge and experience. They are supported by three ex-officio members; one each from the Department of Energy's Idaho Operations Office and its regulators—Region X of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the State of Idaho.

Since its inception in 1994, the INEEL CAB has been encouraged by senior DOE-ID management to look beyond the cleanup program and provide advice on any issue of concern related to the operation of the INEEL. In fulfillment of their obligations as members of the Board, members commit significant time to reviewing issues under consideration and developing agreement around the perspectives and concerns of citizens regarding those issues. To date, the INEEL CAB has reached consensus on all but one of its 81 recommendations.

The INEEL CAB's independence and autonomy are critical to its ability to bring citizen perspectives to DOE management. Limited site knowledge on the part of CAB members has the potential to limit the effectiveness of Board recommendations, however. While potentially increasing the effectiveness of recommendations, increased levels of site knowledge also can result in concerns about diminished objectivity and independence. Consequently, there is dynamic tension between Board autonomy and site knowledge (and the related effectiveness of CAB recommendations).

The authors seek to explore issues that affect the Board's autonomy and the effectiveness of recommendations. The paper offers refined definitions for both concepts and presents lessons learned regarding efforts to simultaneously maximize CAB effectiveness and CAB autonomy.

**INTRODUCTION**

In order for an advisory board composed of ordinary citizens to be of utility to the Department of Energy (DOE), it must be both autonomous and effective. Between its own internal resources and those of its various contractors, DOE has sufficient internal sources to conduct rigorous scientific and technical peer review processes. Those processes often fail to identify public concerns, however, which results in a need for independent, external advice in addition to those internal review processes. In many cases, advisory boards are one of DOE's only sources of independent advice. If an advisory board's advice and recommendations are not well informed, those recommendations may not be perceived as being useful to DOE. Consequently, advisory boards strive for autonomy and effectiveness in serving DOE.

Achieving both autonomy and effectiveness can be quite challenging, however. This paper provides reflections on lessons learned from attempts to maximize both the autonomy and effectiveness of the Citizens Advisory Board (CAB) that provides advice to DOE and its regulators regarding operations at the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL).

## **BACKGROUND**

DOE's complex-wide Site Specific Advisory Boards (SSABs) arose out of the "Keystone Dialogue" in 1992 involving DOE, the Department of Defense, and the Environmental Protection Agency. The Keystone Dialogue was convened to develop enhanced mechanisms for citizen participation in federal environmental cleanup programs. The SSABs, also known as citizen advisory boards, were chartered by DOE under the Federal Advisory Committee Act to provide for citizen input on an ongoing basis.

The INEEL CAB first met in 1994. Since that time, it has served as a window – both for DOE to better understand citizen concerns and reactions, and as an opportunity for a diverse group of citizens to better understand DOE operations. The INEEL CAB members represent a diverse range of demographic characteristics, geographic locations, occupations, and backgrounds that compose the interested citizenry in Idaho.

The INEEL CAB makes formal recommendations to the DOE Idaho Operations Office only when the Board can reach consensus. To date, the CAB has reached consensus on 80 recommendations, including:

- technical recommendations addressing cleanup methods and schedules, waste management and disposal, and the geologic repositories;
- policy recommendations suggesting operational priorities, potential future missions, enhanced cooperation or program integration, and adequate funding to support full regulatory requirements; and
- document-specific recommendations transmitting concerns for incorporation into draft environmental documents and providing comments on draft documents.

## **DEFINING AUTONOMY**

Most dictionaries define autonomy as "self-governance" and focus on the ability of an organization to function independently. DOE's citizen advisory boards are chartered to provide a source of external advice. Because the Department provides funding to cover the direct costs of operating the Boards, the boards are not self-supporting. Consequently, autonomy is generally measured as a function of how independently a board develops its advice.

The INEEL CAB and others like it have addressed this need for independence or autonomy by including among the membership some number of individuals with sufficient technical background and site knowledge to scrutinize DOE's decisions, documents, and policies. This mechanism helps ensure that the Board's advice is not solely reliant on the information provided by Department spokespersons. In addition, it serves to help ensure that the Board's advice is sufficiently well informed to be considered useful by the Department.

## **DEFINING EFFECTIVENESS**

Something is generally considered effective when it produces a desired result. Many assume that means CABs should deliver advice that DOE can put to use. To the extent that internal competence on the Board leads to advice that DOE can incorporate into its decision-making processes, achieving autonomy contributes to the Board's perceived effectiveness.

In trying to develop recommendations that can be used, citizen advisory board members learn more about the organization and the challenges it faces. Many of those who lacked trust gradually come to realize that Department employees are human and well intended. They adopt the lingo, learn the acronyms and jargon, and begin to think like insiders. Most importantly, when they become acculturated, they begin to interpret new information in the same way as long-time DOE'ers do. They cease to think independently as they begin to resemble department employees more than the public. In trying to become more effective, the board loses autonomy as defined (ability to develop independent advice).

Consequently, the Board's advice may bear no resemblance to what "normal" citizens might say to DOE if given the opportunity. Indeed, the extent to which advice developed by an advisory board differs from that which might be offered by a less-well informed body diminishes the board's credibility as representatives of their fellow citizenry. And DOE's ultimate objective—to solicit independent citizen input—is thwarted.

### **REDEFINING AUTONOMY**

In order to help ensure that a citizens board's advice does not run the risk of resembling DOE's own conclusions, recent guidance from DOE-HQ has stressed the need for increasing the diversity of board membership to more closely reflect the diversity of citizens that surround DOE's sites. Autonomy is hence being redefined. The prior strategy of including members with technical expertise and/or site experience is difficult while also trying to recruit people who are more "distant" from the site. This results in greater emphasis being placed on an alternative means of achieving autonomy, involving deliberate attempts to seek alternative sources of information to supplement that provided by the Department. Such efforts may include solicitation of opposing perspectives and/or "expert opinions" from individuals who are perceived to be independent (like academics or researchers). Seeking supplemental information can be time-consuming and is not always fruitful. It nonetheless offers promise as a means for ensuring that advice is not solely reliant on the information provided by Department spokespersons. Similarly, it will help ensure that advice is developed in an autonomous fashion.

### **REDEFINING EFFECTIVENESS**

One problem with the accepted definition of effectiveness as it relates to citizens advisory boards is that it implies DOE should like the advice its gets. Because the boards' primary function is to deliver citizens perspectives, the authors suggest that a refined definition for effectiveness is also in order. The effectiveness of citizen boards should more appropriately be defined as a function of how effectively their recommendations reflect the views and concerns of citizens. As such, the boards must continuously strive to understand and convey the perspectives of a lesser-informed citizenry on the plans and actions of the agency. The risk in interpreting effectiveness in this manner is that DOE receives advice that it cannot (for whatever reason) put to use. And oftentimes program managers consider such advice to be a waste of time.

### **LESSONS LEARNED FOR ATTEMPTING TO ACHIEVE EFFECTIVENESS AND AUTONOMY SIMULTANEOUSLY**

In attempting to develop advice and recommendations independently, citizen advisory boards must seek out alternative expertise on issues of relevance. Such boards should never rely solely on the agency's technical analysis. They should always make every effort to arrive at their own conclusions, based on independently verified information.

In attempting to operate effectively, citizen advisory boards must strive to understand citizen concerns and perspectives and how those concerns and perspectives apply to the agency's policy- and decision-

making. Whenever selecting new members, every effort should be made to maximize diversity in every sense of the word, including racial, demographic, age, and geographic, to improve access to all segments of the public. Individual board members should actively seek out the opinions of their friends and neighbors, colleagues and business associates, acquaintances and fellow parishioners. No board member should assume that he or she adequately understands the views and perspectives of others. The process of informing itself about how the public feels about any particular issue should always be considered a work-in-progress.

Citizen advisory boards must not allow their effectiveness to be defined in terms of how useful their advice is, but rather in terms of how well it serves to reflect the concerns and perspectives of the public they represent. They should always remember that the reason DOE needs citizen boards derives from the agency's repeated failure to understand the concerns and perspectives of the public. The agency has trouble implementing its decisions, like the decision to construct and operate an incinerator at the Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Project, because the public does not always blindly accept DOE's conclusions. Sound public policy ideally reflects not just thorough and appropriate technical analysis, but also an understanding of the social and political context in which decisions are made. Even if a board's advice is not appreciated, it should still be considered effective if it serves to raise DOE's awareness of the public's concerns and perspectives. DOE can help its citizen boards by reminding them of the need to diligently seek out the opinions, perspectives, and concerns of friends, neighbors, and the general public.

Citizen advisory boards must recognize that the duration of membership is related to the degree to which members can continue to serve as representatives of the public. The INEEL CAB has institutionalized this concept by establishing a procedure to turn over at least one-third of its membership every two years. The periodic influx of fresh perspectives serves to help temper the loss of independence that necessarily occurs over time.

In fairness, all potential applicants must be forewarned about the level of commitment that is required for effective participation. Upon induction to the citizens advisory board, new members are barraged with acronyms and jargon. They are expected to learn about the various radioactive and hazardous materials that DOE manages, the laws and regulations that apply, and the history of site operations. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and spend several meetings trying to develop a rudimentary understanding of the complex issues. When a batch of new members started on the INEEL CAB in the spring of 2000, they were subjected to two whole days of informational presentations in an attempt to provide an adequate background. As a matter of course, much of the initial information is provided by presenters who work for DOE or its contractors. This process is painful for all parties, but we think it is unavoidable.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The authors believe that it is inappropriate to conclude that attempts to achieve autonomy necessarily diminish a board's effectiveness, nor that attempts to achieve effectiveness necessarily diminish a board's autonomy. Indeed, we conclude there is no direct inverse relationship. Nonetheless, achieving both is quite difficult and inappropriate definitions can obfuscate the effort. In all likelihood, both effectiveness and autonomy are cyclical in nature, correlating with the longevity of the Board members. We also believe that the periodicity of the two cycles differs.

It is possible that the process of learning that occurs over the duration of membership on a citizen board fundamentally changes the way a board member views the issues under consideration. It is also possible that the expectation that boards can honestly reflect the views and perspectives of the less-well informed public cannot be realized. Understanding the tensions around autonomy and effectiveness can assuredly help both DOE and the Board to fully comprehend the Board's role and responsibilities.

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In sum, achieving autonomy and effectiveness simultaneously is not impossible. But perhaps the effort requires careful framing to ensure all parties understand what is meant by both concepts. And it can only be achieved through diligence and ongoing effort.