

## **Engaging the Public on Complex Issues: Communication challenges and Solutions-17521**

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### **Abstract**

Public buy-in and support can make or break a project that has local environmental effects and implications, especially if that project takes place in a large community that is in-touch with its local and national government. Because of this, effective public communication is essential to the future of projects that can have an impact on a local community.

This paper addresses the challenges and methods of communicating complex, scientific and/or technical issues with the public in an easy-to-understand, engaging manner while still accomplishing the communication goals of the organization.

For consideration in particular is the challenge of communicating the proposed path forward and ongoing progress being made at ORP's tank farms and Waste Treatment and Immobilization Plant project to help build support and acceptance with local and national audiences.

By using a variety of engagement opportunities and communication tools, we are able to educate the public on the issues being addressed by the organization, the possible solutions to these issues, and the challenges involved. An engaged and well-informed public can assist the organization in accomplishing its mission by educating and influencing audiences that have an impact on the organization.

### **Communication is required by law**

Communication with the American public is required by law of a government organization. Best outlined in the Department of Defense's "Principles of Information<sup>i</sup>" which says, in short, that the agency is obligated to communicate to the taxpayers what the Department is accomplishing with their money. In a government of, by and for the people, the people have an inherent right to know what their government agencies are doing.

Specifically, under the law, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (5 U.S.C. 552)<sup>ii</sup> provides a right of access for the general public to federal agency records, including information created or maintained by its departments. For many federal agencies this is further outlined in the Code, and expanded upon to outline how the particular department will communicate, through which outlets and more – to include interaction with the news media.

In addition to, and a derivative of communication with the public, is the oversight authority that Congress has over agencies in the Executive branch. Congressional

oversight is an inherent mandate of representative assemblies, which enact public law.

While the same laws apply to the Department of Energy, the Department also has requirements under state and federal regulations<sup>iii</sup> to conduct public involvement and information activities.

Finally, there are public advisory groups at the Site level, composed of interested parties representing various publics within the affected or nearby communities, governed by the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).<sup>iv</sup> FACA talks about how those groups are organized and managed, and the groups provide policy advice from the interested local community.

### **How we communicate**

An agency must communicate what it is doing with the general public and the local communities. What is done at sites has the potential to affect not only the local residents, but also the environment. For many sites, the local population is also a big part of the project team. Between the federal employees and the prime and subcontractors, the Hanford Site alone employs nearly 10,000 people who are part of the community, which gives them a personal stake in ensuring a safe and timely completion of the cleanup mission.

To that end, the government employs public affairs personnel or public information officers to share agency goals and plans to accomplish them with the public. In most public affairs offices, the job is to interact with the media to “tell the story” of what the agency is doing, and in DOE that’s often the case. But the more challenging task for the department is to effectively communicate to the public and engaged stakeholders the often complex issues it is facing and how public concerns are being addressed. We hope to ultimately gain public buy-in but for some groups we know that can be difficult; but by being open, transparent and timely in our communications, we can strive to build understanding and ease concerns.

One often finds technical staff pulled into the role of the communicator, but that can be a challenge because as simple as it might seem to share what a site is doing with the public, it must be done effectively, which generally requires a non-technical approach. Enter the public affairs officer, who has the role of learning the mission of the site, the progress being made, challenges faced, possible solutions, and any potential concerns. Then, the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) must be able to translate that complicated story for public understanding.

Another level of communication seen within DOE is a focus on public involvement, so the process requires a greater level of interaction, dialogue and discussion with the public. Cleanup work will affect the local community. To that end, we invite and accept public feedback and input to help in the decision-making – as the community must live with the end result of the cleanup process, so should they have a voice in the method of that process. The public doesn’t just want to hear the agency – they want to be heard, and to know how the agency is using that feedback.

### **Facilitating communication within an agency**

Effective communication requires that site leadership is on board with the public affairs mission. Management leads the way in creating an atmosphere of transparency and facilitating access to the technical and subject-matter-experts in order to enable PA's understanding, which promotes open communication with all the site's audiences.

The PAO's first audience is internal. An agency's best communicators are its employees. Employees are the public face of the community and an integral part in establishing the credibility of an agency. The PAO helps develop messaging – short information-blurbs to communicate what the agency is doing – to support effective interactions within the community. Public affairs facilitates that in many ways, including setting up speaking engagements with local groups, supporting external volunteer activities, media interviews and more, all with the goal of getting information about the site out to the community.

As the DOE is a very collaborative environment, the PAO also has the requirement to coordinate with its higher headquarters public affairs offices. At the site level, the subject-matter-experts and PA work to develop the messages and stories, then share it with EM and above to enable all levels to speak from the same page. This can be critical as it is at the headquarters level that most of the congressional communications take place.

When all levels are working together, sharing information accurately and effectively, it further builds the credibility of the agency. Whether to the news media, on social media, on the web or at speaking engagements, a consistency of information-sharing highlights the agency's credibility and transparency.

Public engagement and support is critical to the success of an organization, it is perhaps even more so when environmental remediation and cleanup are part of the mission. Not only does public understanding of the issues lead to better awareness of the challenges faced by an agency, but it also leads to better dialogue and solutions to concerns and challenges. Gaining public trust can also benefit the agency in many other ways, such as working with local and national officials to help mitigate concerns with funding or focus. This can also mean better access to local resources, and a better reception of the mission and employees.

### **Bringing it all together**

Public communications may seem like a simple and straightforward task. Often, as we've all seen, it's not. There is the challenge of engaging the news media with the often not-so-sexy technical or scientific story of a site; there's the challenge of sharing that same complicated story with the general public, which is often just wondering "How does this affect me?"; and there's the challenge of breaking through internal stovepipes that employees may develop when they are focused on one aspect of a mission, and helping them to become an ambassador for the organization, sharing their technical knowledge in a way that the general public can understand.

The Department of Energy at Hanford faces all of these challenges and more. The complexity of the mission exceeds other sites across the Environmental Management complex. From the 177 underground tanks – each with its own unique combination of chemical and radioactive waste – to the ongoing refinement of the waste treatment and immobilization mission, and a new focus on the treatment of low-activity waste in advance of full plant operation – Hanford's River Protection Project presents a highly complex communications challenge.

Additional challenges faced by public affairs include ongoing litigation against the Department, which restricts communication on certain topics, as well as the sensitivity of discussing aspects of the project affected by budget uncertainties.

The challenges of litigation and technical expertise require close coordination with both legal teams at the site and at EM, as well as building good working relationships with experts at site level so the PA team can understand the site actions well enough to effectively communicate them with the public.

To communicate the mission, the site office takes a number of actions.

The Public Affairs (PA) team writes news stories on emergent topics within the site which are released to the internal EM newsletter. This is read externally as well as internal to DOE, and its readership includes many interest groups, media and congressional members and staff. This helps in promoting progress and solutions to challenges to audiences that have an impact and interest in the success of the mission.

The PA team also engages in a robust speakers bureau program, which includes communities throughout the states of Washington and Oregon, in communities along the Columbia River, and to the many special-interest groups and Native American tribes who are affected by the site. Sending agency leadership or subject-matter-experts to brief these groups helps facilitate understanding while allowing members of the public to share concerns and engage in dialog with the site.

The site office also proactively engages with local and regional public schools and universities as well as the national labs in the region to strengthen the focus on Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM) needs and to boost interest in elementary and high schools on developing STEM programs. This involves employee volunteers for STEM programs, and leadership working together to make these programs and opportunities available. This can provide the opportunity to build credibility and understanding of the mission, while helping to develop the next generation of STEM professionals to help accomplish the mission.

Finally, PA conducts a regular tour program on site, which allows both special interest and general public groups to visit the site and learn about both the historical and current mission at Hanford. This helps lift the perceived veil of secrecy that long shrouded the site and, for some, still lingers today. Along with the recent designation of B Reactor as a National Historical Park, these community

engagement activities help share the story of Hanford and facilitate a path to understanding the current challenges, goals and accomplishments with a wider audience.

## Conclusion

Communicating an organization's mission, goals and accomplishments is not always easy, but for a government agency it's a must. The public has the right to know, and the agency needs to be able to communicate clearly and build a trust with its affected communities. When technical challenges and complexities mix with legal restrictions and sensitivities, the challenge is greater – but that's when it's most essential for an agency to strive for the highest levels of transparency and timely communication in order to build public understanding and support.

When a mission is as highly complex as Hanford's, it takes the combined efforts and support of public affairs professionals, subject-matter-experts and agency leadership to create a multi-faceted public affairs program, which has the goal of helping affected communities, local government, tribes, regulators, oversight agencies and Congress understand how the site is working to meet its requirements, follow regulations and best accomplish its cleanup mission while keeping a focus on the worker safety, the community and the environment.

Building this coalition of support can help the agency accomplish its mission in many ways – correcting misconceptions and spreading understanding of the accomplishments and path forward to the general public; leveraging relationships with local, state and federal government officials to help facilitate that same understanding; and further building the credibility of the agency in its ability to accomplish the mission.

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<sup>i</sup> United States, Department of Defense, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (ASD/PA). (n.d.). *Department of Defense Directive Number 5122.05* (pp. 1-10). Retrieved February 2, 2017, from <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/512205p.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> The Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, As Amended By Public Law No. 104-231, 110 Stat. 3048. Retrieved February 2, 2017, from <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/USCODE-2011-title5/USCODE-2011-title5-partI-chap5-subchapII-sec552/content-detail.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Wash. Administrative Code §173-303. Retrieved February 2, 2017, from <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=173-303>

<sup>iv</sup> General Services Administrative, Federal Advisory Committee Management, 41 CFR Parts 101-6 and 102-3. Retrieved February 2, 2017, from [https://www.gsa.gov/graphics/ogp/FACAFinalRule\\_R2E-cNZ\\_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf](https://www.gsa.gov/graphics/ogp/FACAFinalRule_R2E-cNZ_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf)