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Communicating Amidst Diversity

By Carol J. Forrest

"Managing diversity" is one of the business world's catch-phrases for the 1990s. It describes the often elusive process of encouraging and empowering persons of all racial and ethnic groups and both sexes to participate fully in the workplace. A corollary exists for those of us in environmental communication that might be called "communicating amidst diversity."

Differences in the style and mode of communication may be determined by any number of factors. Race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level are major factors that a communicator should consider. This article provides but an introduction to the complex topic of cross-cultural communication. Its purpose is to introduce the subject and to encourage a dialogue among NAPEC members and other communicators.

Although it isn't possible to make hard-and-fast rules about how to communicate successfully every time to a particular community, interviews with spokespersons from several minority communities and environmental communicators from government and industry revealed two points that communicators should consider. The first is quite obvious — the need for communicators to recognize the desire of community members to have input into the decision-making process. The second can be more demanding and more subtle; it is the need for communicators to consider the environmental situation in

conjunction with other community issues.

Access to Decision Making

Hazel Johnson, an African-American environmental activist from the southeast side of Chicago, holds a position that is somewhat unique. As the founder of the non-profit People for Community Recovery, she is both a communicator to her own and other communities and an opinion leader and liaison with government and industry communicators. Johnson's approach to environmental communication relies heavily on personal communication both to convey her message and to receive input from community members. She seeks out her subjects door-to-door, if necessary, to determine their views on the environmental problems in her area. She also tracks down residents by making phone calls using a phone book that is indexed by address, and distributing fliers to notify community members of environmental concerns.

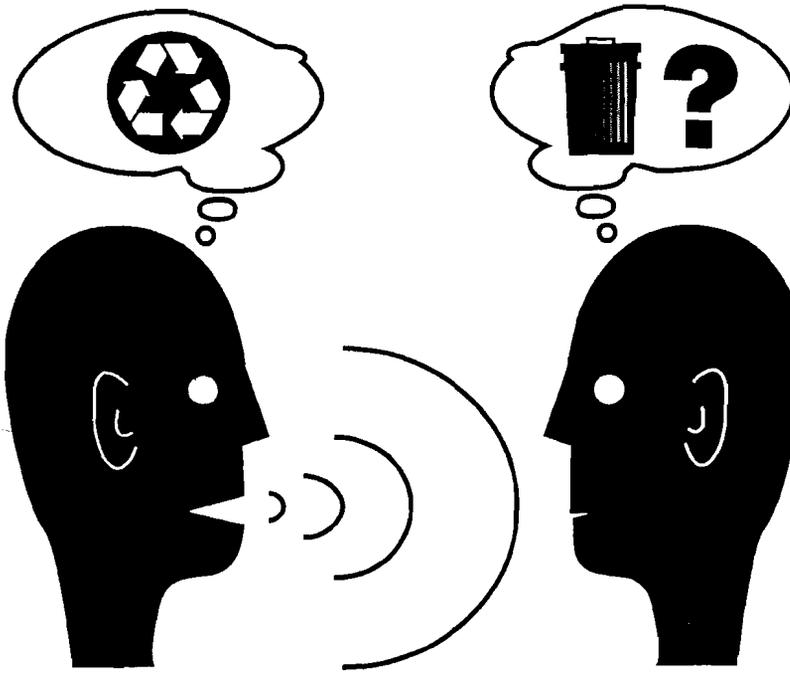
"You can spend a million dollars on advertising, but unless you get out and talk to the people, you aren't going to know what they think, and what's really happening," says Johnson. "When you go into their homes, it does a lot to listen to their problems and show concern about what you can do for them, not just what you're there to tell them, or get from them."

Johnson believes that her labor intensive approach is necessary within her community in order to obtain input from residents who otherwise would remain silent about their concerns.

Dr. Robert Bullard, a Professor of Sociology at the University of California who has chronicled the African-American environmental movement in his book, *Dumping in Dixie*, is emphatic about the need for government and industry communicators to listen to community members and give them access to the decision-making process. Bullard, who is himself African-American, states, "We can speak for ourselves. We want to be treated as equal partners, and have equal access to information to decide for ourselves."

Richard Moore, of the Southwest Organizing Project, an eight-state social action network headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico, agrees, describing his own frustration with "mainstream" advocacy groups, "who advocate for us, rather than with us. Advocacy organizations will contact us after the legislation has been approved and say, 'see what we did for you,' rather than involving us in the process." His organization is becoming more pro-active on environmental issues to ensure input into the decision-making process.

Environmental Issues = Community Issues



In many communities, environmental problems are often seen as intermingled with other issues affecting a community, such as jobs or housing.

Bullard's book, *Dumping in Dixie* has re-defined the term "environment" to include, in Bullard's words, "where we live, work, and play." He adds, "environmental concerns cannot be separated from housing and economic issues in our communities. The environment is a social justice issue."

This sentiment was echoed by the other community spokespersons, as well. Chas Wheelock of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin explains that tribal governance and land issues, which are a direct result of the treaties between the tribes and the U.S. gov-

ernment, invariably have an impact on the handling of environmental matters in Native American or Indian communities (Wheelock explains that there are differences of opinion as to which term – Native American or Indian or the use of the tribal name – is preferable). Another factor that can effect the handling of environmental matters in these communities is the earth-based spirituality practiced by many tribe members.

"If the attitude is only to deal with the environment, then don't

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deal with this community. You cannot deal one-dimensionally with this community," advises Wheelock.

In some cases environmental problems are not only enmeshed in community issues, they are defined as community issues.

Moore of the Southwest Organizing Project describes his own organization's efforts to determine the level of environmental concern in Latino communities.

"Many of our communities have never viewed environmental issues as environmental issues," he says, explaining that when surveys were taken asking residents to list their five major environmental concerns, few responded.

"But when we asked them about community issues, they listed the smells coming from the sewage treatment plant, the bad taste in the water, saw dust in the air from the particle board factory down the road. They didn't define these as environmental problems, they defined them as community problems," says Moore.

Communicating Through Institutions and Individuals in the Community

Both language barriers and cultural differences had to be overcome to deal with an environmental problem in Toronto, Ontario. The population of Toronto is ethnically and racially diverse. The neighborhood in question, which was contaminated by lead, was home to both Chinese and Portuguese immigrants.

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment wished to test the soil around each of the houses in the neighborhood. This required permission from the residents. Letters

translated into the proper language were sent to each household. There was no response. After a second letter was sent and no response was received, the Ministry sent an interpreter door-to-door. In the case of the Chinese, the Ministry discovered that the letters had been carefully saved unopened, because they were from the government.

"This wasn't a language problem — this was a cultural problem," says Ginette Whitten-Day, Manager of Planning and Programs of the Public Affairs and Communications Services Branch of the Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

Ultimately, the problem was solved and 100% participation with the testing program was achieved by approaching the Portuguese community members through the Portuguese Catholic church, and the Chinese through public service announcements on a Chinese television program called "Chinavision."

"Something in both cultures made it necessary for the message to come from within their culture rather than from without," explains Whitten-Day.

Whitten-Day states that the Ministry often uses the ethnic media in Toronto. An ethnic media association translates press releases into the appropriate language and places them in the appropriate medium.

Moore of the Southwest Organizing Project says that, in his experience, language — in this case, Spanish — can create a problem. "In many cases, there aren't direct translations for chemical names. It's hard to match up the right words to get the meanings across," he says.

It is not always possible to contact everyone in a given communi-

ty. In such cases, key people, or opinion leaders, need to be sought out. If possible, persons within the community should be enlisted to help convey messages and solicit feedback.

Bullard points to the churches, and other social action or community organizations — including grass-roots environmental groups — as key to communicating with minority communities.

It is important to identify all of the community leaders, elected officials, neighborhood organizations, and other decision makers and opinion leaders in the community.

Wheelock agrees with this point, explaining that although federal law set up tribal councils to govern Native American or Indian reservations, in some cases, these councils are at odds with Native American environmental activists, who also wield influence within these communities and should be included in the decision-making process.

Trends Shaping the Future

Two trends appear to be having an impact on environmental communication to and among different racial and ethnic communities. The first is the growing awareness of the need for education in environmental matters. The second is the building of coalitions both among minority community groups and between minority community groups and "mainstream" environmental groups.

Industry, government and community environmental group spokespersons agree that increasing the level of understanding about the environment will benefit all parties by helping community members make informed decisions about environmental matters. To

this end, Johnson's organization, People for Community Recovery, is holding classes for interested community members to teach them about environmental regulations and permitting. Other community groups are working to educate their constituents, as well.

Johnson has also co-founded a coalition of eight grass-roots organizations – comprising African-American, Caucasian, and Latino communities – called Citizens United to Reclaim the Environment (CURE) to address environmental concerns effecting an entire region of the Chicago area.

CURE is but one of a growing number of formal organizations and coalitions involving different racial and ethnic communities.

During the fall of 1991, some 650 activists from the U.S., Mexico, the Marshall Islands, Chile, and Africa met in Washington D.C. for the First United People of Color Environmental Summit, sponsored by the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice. More such conferences are planned.

The formation of coalitions and formal organizations should make the task of reaching diverse racial or ethnic communities easier since these organizations can help provide access to specific communities. However, these coalitions will also undoubtedly demand a higher level of participation for community members and require ever more rigorous documentation on environmental hazards or benefits to their communities. As these organizations evolve, the environmental communication discipline will have to evolve with them. ●

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