Community Assessments: Roadmaps to Successful Public Involvement

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This paper presents a framework for performing comprehensive community assessments to increase the effectiveness of public involvement efforts. The community assessment process involves the systematic and critical examination of the beliefs, attitudes, opinions and knowledge of the many groups that comprise the community. A good community assessment gathers information on the concerns or issues directly related to an environmental project as well as other important community issues to ensure that an effective public involvement program can be developed.

The framework described in this paper discusses the types of people and organizations that should be included in the community assessment interview process. It also delineates the steps that persons charged with performing assessments can take to ensure that the views of all potential stakeholders are included -- a necessary consideration in communities that are ethnically, racially, or economically diverse. Lastly, the framework discusses the types of written materials that can be analyzed for additional insight into communities. For example, it discusses methods for reviewing past issues of the local newspaper to provide both validation of the information gathered during interviews and an understanding of the ways that community members give and receive information and respond to conflict or perceived threats.

This framework is designed to show environmental professionals who are responsible for public involvement how to perform an initial community assessment. It provides illustrations of instances in which information vital to a successful public involvement effort has been uncovered through a careful assessment of the community. Both the U.S. EPA and the public have made clear their intentions to require increased public involvement. Many of these efforts will succeed or fail based on how well those charged with the public involvement component of environmental projects identify community issues and design communications programs that successfully reach all stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The community assessment is often the first step in establishing a community relations or public involvement program. Not only does the process provide vital information for the development of the program, it is also often the first contact community members may have with a company or a regulatory agency regarding a site or facility. In most cases, the simple act of asking community members for their views is itself a positive and powerful community relations activity. Even in cases in which concerns run high and tempers run hot, the assessment can be the catalyst to begin a positive dialogue.

Community assessments may be performed in support of a number of different types of "environmental projects," including investigative and remediation activities under CERCLA, permitting activities under RCRA, voluntary cleanups, or other projects or situations involving environmental issues. They may also be performed on behalf of commercial or government facilities whose chemical use, operations, or emissions, discharges, or waste generation could lead to concern on the part of community residents. In all of these cases, assessments are performed to identify stakeholders and gather information regarding their concerns. The assessment should provide sufficient information so that the resulting public involvement program fits the community and includes all stakeholders.

Defining the Community is Key to Identifying Stakeholders

Every community is different. Some communities have been sensitized to the presence of hazardous wastes and other environmental hazards or issues through previous experiences. Some communities have well defined channels for the dissemination of information, such as traditions of town meetings or highly visible opinion leaders who act as conduits of information. Other communities dislike "outsiders." They may be hostile toward communication attempts from out-of-town activists and environmental agency personnel alike. They may judge a contaminated site owned by a local family to pose considerably less risk than a similar site owned by an out-of-town company. Obviously, both the messages themselves and the methods of communication must be tailored to fit the individual community.

Although veterans at performing community assessments may be able to anticipate certain attitudes or the presence and degree of dominance of certain types of stakeholder groups, a close look at any community will yield some surprises that can influence the design of the public involvement program. Experience can, however, provide an understanding of the types of information that should be sought out to ensure that the program fits the community.

Information for community assessments is typically gathered through interviews and review of documents. The interviews focus on community members or others who may have knowledge about or an interest in the project. Most of these people will be stakeholders. Documents reviewed for the assessment typically include demographic data, media coverage such as newspaper stories, and historical information about the area. Information gathering techniques are discussed in the latter half of this paper.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF THE ASSESSMENT

Community assessments should look beyond the immediate boundaries of the environmental project. Expanding the assessment process to consider other issues as well as the political

structure and communication channels of the community typically leads to the identification of additional stakeholders who should be included in the public involvement process.
A wealth of incredibly useful information becomes readily apparent once a person charged with performing an assessment broadens the scope of the process beyond the environmental project and considers the community as a whole. To expand the scope of an assessment, the person performing it should ask questions such as the following during the information gathering process:

- What is the demographic makeup of the community? Are there racial or ethnic minority residents or neighborhoods, or economically disadvantaged residents or neighborhoods, that have special concerns? Do they have special preferences or needs regarding methods of communication?

- How segmented is the community? What is/are the relationship(s) among readily identifiable segments of the population?

- Are there individuals or groups that are especially active regarding environmental or community issues?

- To what extent might different, readily identifiable (e.g., by demographic characteristics, geographic location, business/economic or political interests) groups or individuals be interested in or affected by the project?

- What degree of access do members of the various population segments potentially affected by the project have to the political structure of the community and to "mainstream" information channels?

- What is "the community" in this particular case? What are the boundaries of the area in which residents may feel they are affected by a specific site or facility?

- Are there people or groups from beyond the community that could have an interest in the site or facility?

- Are there any schools, hospitals, playgrounds, parks, community centers, day care centers or nursing homes located in proximity to a site or facility that could heighten community concern regarding exposure, cleanup or waste handling activities? This is a question that should also be considered in regard to transportation routes in cases in which hazardous wastes or materials are transported into or out of a facility or site.

- How do different stakeholder groups express themselves? How do they give and receive information? In cases of diverse populations, do specific groups have their own methods or channels for giving and receiving information?

- How do stakeholder groups respond to perceived threats? Do they rally behind public officials? Do they organize into ad hoc committees? Do they call in outside experts or activists?

- What level of knowledge do community residents have regarding the site or facility?

- What are the other issues -- either environmental or non-environmental -- in the community or among stakeholders? How might these issues affect public perceptions or levels of concern?

IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS

The primary goal of a community assessment is to identify persons and organizations that may be affected by or interested in a site or facility and gain an understanding of their concerns or interests. Persons who have knowledge of the area or the site but are not necessarily direct stakeholders -- such as people who are knowledgeable about the community but no longer live there -- should also be identified as potential interview subjects.

All possible stakeholder groups should be identified. As current concern with environmental equity suggests, some groups have in the past been excluded from dialogues regarding environmental or community issues. In many cases the majority of community residents may have no real interest in an environmental project. Regardless of the level of interest, however, the community assessment process should identify the various groups that live or work in the area to ensure that the public involvement program will include channels of communication that can reach all of them.

Defining Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder groups may be definable along a number of different lines (e.g., neighborhood affiliation, ethnicity, race, interest in environmental issues, place/industry of employment). The dominant characteristics of readily definable stakeholder groups will vary according to the project or situation and some individuals may fit within several different groups. Thus, it is necessary to determine which features or characteristics define potential stakeholder groups in regard to a particular environmental project.

For example, if the project involves siting a hazardous waste treatment facility in an industrial park near a residential neighborhood, characteristics that are likely to define specific stakeholder groups could include neighborhood affiliation, membership in an environmental organization concerned with hazardous wastes, ownership of a local business that may use the facility's services, etc.

In the case of soil contamination at a site near a grade school, a characteristic that is likely to define at least one stakeholder group is having grade school children in attendance at the school.

It should be emphasized that some stakeholder groups are not readily identifiable at first glance. These are groups that are defined in part by their concerns about other issues that may be tangentially related to the environmental project in question.

For example, an ad hoc citizens group is concerned about truck traffic, particularly along routes near schools and parks. Although they may have no great interest in hazardous waste issues, they may have concerns about truck traffic in conjunction with the remediation of a site. They need to be included in the dialogue about the site as remedial actions are considered.

In addition to those persons who may be stakeholders because they live in proximity to a site or facility, some common features or characteristics that can define stakeholder groups are demographic characteristics, business/economic or political interests, and membership in ad hoc and formal community or environmental organizations.

Demographic Characteristics

There are a number of demographic variables that one might look for when seeking to identify distinct population segments within a community. Race, primary language, ethnicity, and household income tend to be among the most obvious. Less obvious can be age (e.g., a high concentration of senior citizens), religious affiliation, and even divisions between long-term residents and recent arrivals to the community.

If a stakeholder group is defined according to a demographic characteristic, then the degree to which the group's members are represented within the political structure of the community is an important consideration when determining whether special efforts will be necessary to reach out to them. Are these people included to a significant degree in the mainstream community dialogue? If they are not, then what special methods of communication might be used to ensure their inclusion?

Business/Economic or Political Interests

Stakeholder groups may form along the lines of business/economic or political interests. The most obvious of these types of stakeholder groups is the administration of the municipality in which a site or facility is located. In some cases an environmental issue can become a focal point for political battles. The public involvement specialist will have to determine how to deal with the different factions with the least amount of disruption. One of the major reasons for conducting a review of local newspaper articles is to determine whether local issues such as the project at hand tend to become politicized and in what regard.

Persons or organizations with business or economic interests that may be affected by an environmental project -- such as jobs -- should also be considered stakeholders.

Ad hoc and Formal Community or Environmental Organizations

Determining the degree to which formal community or environmental organizations can be considered stakeholders requires a critical review of their actual activities. For example, the mere presence of a "mainstream," conservation-oriented environmental organization in a community does not necessarily mean that it will function as a dominant stakeholder. Conversely, the absence of formal organizations does not mean that no one is interested in community or environmental issues.

In the author's experience, ad hoc groups (groups which form to address a specific issue) often demand more information and a greater amount of dialogue during the RCRA permitting process than "formal" groups. Thus, they are as important to identify as formal groups. Sometimes ad hoc groups become formal organizations over time as they become sensitized to the need for public involvement in community issues.

If ad hoc groups have already formed to address the issues surrounding an environmental project, they can typically be identified during the interview process or through a review of local news stories. If the community assessment is being performed at the outset of a project, however, groups may not have formed yet. In such cases, persons interviewed can be asked whether the formation of community groups is a common response to community concerns and who might be involved in forming such a group (e.g., local opinion leaders or community or environmental activists). Newspaper stories can be reviewed to determine if community members tend to form ad hoc groups. In the author's experience, the formation of ad hoc groups is prevalent in some communities and virtually nonexistent in others.

"Outsiders"

Lastly, both the interviews and the newspaper review should look for evidence of groups or individuals from outside the immediate area that may take an interest in the site or facility and that will function as stakeholders. Persons performing assessments should also seek to determine whether the involvement of outside organizations or activists will be welcomed by community members.

Categories of People Who Should be Interviewed During the Assessment

Since interviews are performed to identify stakeholders -- and the community is typically an unknown at the outset of the assessment -- a systematic approach should be used to increase the likelihood that all stakeholders and concerns will be identified.

Elected and Staff Officials and Regulatory Agency Personnel

Most interviews for community assessments will include discussions with elected and staff officials, such as the mayor, public safety personnel, health department personnel, etc. Regulatory agency personnel familiar with the site or the area should also be interviewed in person or via the telephone.

Additionally, regional planning officials can provide excellent insight into community concerns <u>and</u> community behavior (e.g., "people in this community are particularly sensitive to land use issues," or "go through the mayor if you are going to set up a meeting in that community").

Civic and Business Organizations

Civic and business organization personnel, such as chamber of commerce personnel, can often provide useful information on the community. Although members of such organizations are often "community boosters" and may not be particularly forthcoming with negative information, they invariably know the community's history, its key opinion leaders, and how the political process works and will provide such information if asked.

Another excellent source of information on a community and its behavior is public affairs/community relations managers for local facilities. Increasingly, mid- and large-sized facilities have assigned managers to perform community outreach functions. These people often have an intimate understanding of the political structure of the community and potential stakeholder groups within it and are willing to share this information with other community relations/public involvement specialists.

Residential and Commercial Neighbors

Both residential and commercial neighbors should be interviewed during a community assessment. These are typically the most difficult interviews to conduct, either because the neighbor is suspicious of talking to a stranger or because they don't know what to say. The section of this paper on **Conducting Interviews** provides some hints for interviewing neighbors.

Persons Involved in Community or Environmental Issues

Persons who are known to have an interest in environmental or community issues should be interviewed. These people may belong to formal or ad hoc organizations and are often opinion leaders or conduits of information on the topics in which they are active. As such, interviewers should pay special attention to the level of knowledge such people possess regarding the subject site, facility, or project as well as their overall understanding of environmental issues.

Customers and Suppliers

In cases involving voluntary cleanups, RCRA permitting activities, or on-going facility operations, the companies or entities for which the assessments are being performed may wish to include customer and/or supplier interviews in the assessment. These businesses can be important stakeholders and may require special communications to answer questions they may have about activities at the site or facility.

Getting Names and Phone Numbers

One of the best ways to identify potential stakeholders is to ask each person interviewed for the names and phone numbers of other persons who would be interested in the project or who have, or could have, concerns. Frequently, this is the best way of obtaining the names of informal opinion leaders or persons involved in ad hoc community or environmental groups. A review of newspaper stories on environmental or community issues will also yield the names of potential stakeholders and opinion leaders.

In cases in which a community is very fragmented, or the interviewer is concerned that potential stakeholders, such as racial or ethnic minorities or economically disadvantaged residents, have not been identified through referrals, additional research is necessary. Local librarians are often aware of organizations that serve specific population segments. They can often provide referrals to social service or public school personnel who work with neighborhood groups. The phone book is also an excellent reference source. Look for churches, specialty bookstores, or specialty grocery stores that may serve the particular segment of the community. In the case of churches, talk to clergy or office personnel. Bookstores and grocery stores or other such businesses that serve specific market segments frequently have bulletin boards with community announcements if the sales staff is unable to assist.

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE COMMUNITY

A variable that should always be addressed in a good assessment is the boundaries of the community for a given environmental project. For example, in the case of site X, what are the likely geographical boundaries in which potential stakeholders may reside? The boundaries will vary, typically depending on the geographical extent of the perceived risk.

For example, if the issue is minor soil contamination at a site in an industrial area that is not near any residences, the "area of concern" may be very small, and include only the people who work at the site or immediately adjacent to it.

If the minor soil contamination is on a lot adjacent to a day care center, the "area of concern" could include the entire town -- and parents of the children who attend the facility are likely to be the most dominant stakeholders.

Issues involving air, such as emissions from incinerators, or regional water supplies, appear to have the largest "areas of concern." Thus, community relations specialists who are working on projects involving such issues will have to plan for communicating with people who may live a number of miles downwind or downstream.

Determining the likely boundaries of the potentially affected community can be done by asking questions such as the following during interviews: "Will the people on the other side of town want this information?" "Do the people in the town down the road pay attention to what is going on here?"

CONSIDERING OTHER COMMUNITY ISSUES

Environmental projects do not exist in a vacuum. Everyone views the information he or she receives within the context of his or her own experience. It is important to identify the other issues -- historical or current -- that have or are likely to shape the way the community views a specific environmental project.

For example, community residents who are concerned about a leaking local landfill that has caused groundwater contamination may be less than enthusiastic about news that a RCRA hazardous waste unit is going to be closed "as a landfill" and subjected to post-closure monitoring.

Additionally, other contamination problems, accidents, real or perceived incidents of "cancer clusters" or other negative health effects all serve to sensitize area residents to environmental issues in general. Invariably, community members will view news about a site, facility, or other environmental project within the context of what they know about other environmental issues in the community.

Bad relations between population segments in a community, concerns about economic conditions, a rapidly growing or shrinking population, and accusations of corruption among local officials are all examples of non-environmental issues that can have a major impact on the way community members respond to an environmental project. Certainly, persons designing a public involvement program need to consider such issues.

The issues mentioned in the previous paragraph can have a major impact on an environmental project, even though they are recognized as "non-environmental." Not infrequently, other "non-environmental" issues, such as labor disputes or opposition to certain types of developments, are expressed as environmental issues.

For example, the local chapter of a labor union launched a major campaign against several facilities that used certain chemicals in their processes, inferring that the facilities were endangering human health and the environment by employing non-union workers. Their literature, which aimed at raising concerns about the presence of the chemicals in the community, was using an environmental concern as part of their campaign to promote union representation in the facilities.

Although the environmental aspects of such situations must be addressed -- and it may not be possible to even acknowledge the existence of underlying concerns or motives in formal communication -- knowing that another issue is the driving force can help public involvement specialists address the situation effectively.

INFORMATION COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Persons conducting community assessments gather information through telephone and in-person interviews and through the review of documents containing information about the community. The goal of the information gathering process should not be merely to answer the question, "are these people concerned about project X -- yes or no."

If the answer is "yes," then the person conducting the assessment should seek to understand why area residents are concerned and what other issues, attitudes, and beliefs are driving the concerns.

If the answer is "no," then the person conducting the assessment needs to determine why it is "no." Is it because residents have knowledge of the project and their questions have been answered? Because they trust the parties involved? Because they do not believe that it has an impact on them? Or is it because they lack knowledge about the project? If this is the case, then do the attitudes they express about other issues suggest the degree of concern they might have if they do gain knowledge of the project? How might these concerns be best addressed?

Persons performing community assessments should compare the information they gather from different sources. Disparities in information can provide valuable insight into community or stakeholder biases. Incorrect or untrue information should be noted. Such information can help direct the communication efforts that will be necessary to support the project. Additionally, persons performing assessments should note the level of knowledge and overall understanding of specific environmental issues that different stakeholders possess so that communication efforts will reflect an appropriate level of detail.

Conducting Interviews

The interview process is itself often an important step in establishing a positive dialogue with stakeholders. Community residents are pleased to be consulted regarding their opinions -- as long as the interviewer is perceived as interested in hearing their opinions. All persons interviewed should be approached with respect.

Failure to obtain useful information during interviews is often the result of interviews that are too short. Gathering information about environmental and community issues requires interviews that are long enough -- approximately one hour is a good average length -- to allow a thorough discussion of the relevant issues. Don't be afraid of "small talk" during interviews. Not only does it build trust and rapport, but the "small talk" and off-hand remarks that occur as bridges between the subjects targeted for discussion or at the very end of the interview often provide significant insight into the attitudes or expectations of the person being interviewed.

It is important to recognize that persons being interviewed may not be willing to verbalize their attitudes or concerns at the outset of an interview. Especially in the case of residential neighbors, there may be reluctance to provide information because of suspicions regarding the motives of the interviewer and concerns regarding the consequences of the interview. In all interviews, some degree of trust must be established. In the case of residential neighbors, the degree of trust must often be substantial. Expressing genuine respect for, and interest in, the person's views and well-being, and explaining that the goal of the public involvement program is to ensure that community members' concerns and wishes are addressed, will help to establish trust.

It is also important to recognize that persons who are being interviewed may not be readily able to voice the cause of their concerns -- or lack of concerns -- about a project. These people are not attempting to be evasive, they simply cannot reel off a list of all of the beliefs, incidents, and feelings that lead them to experience concern without some discussion. Concerns about an environmental project typically comprise health issues, economic issues, and power issues. The attitudes linked to these issues are -- for lack of a better analogy -- stored in a number of different "files" in the brain. Thus, to get a complete picture of the many forces at work that lead to concerns, it is necessary to spend time discussing a number of different issues related to the project, the community, and the environment in general.

Reviewing Documents

A review of readily accessible information, such as demographic data, area history, and newspaper stories, should be part of every assessment. Such information can help the person who is conducting the assessment determine the questions he or she should ask during interviews, confirm interview data or point out biases, and fill in the many "blanks" that reliance on interviews alone would otherwise leave. For example, community members may omit important information during interviews, often because it is so well known to area residents as to seem not worth mentioning. Review of basic documentation about the community can often uncover such information so that persons conducting interviews can ask about it.

Demographic Data

Demographic data, such as the information provided by the census, provides important information about race, ethnicity, average age, household income, housing values and percentage of ownership, education levels, occupation, and number of years in current residence. Demographic data that is broken down by census tracts or neighborhoods within a municipality is especially useful for identifying population segments that may have special communication requirements.

Demographic data is usually available at the reference desk of the local library, through the municipal, county, or regional planning department, of from the local chamber of commerce. A review of demographic data will help validate how knowledgeable persons who are interviewed about the community actually are or if they are unaware of or dismissive toward certain demographic groups.

Historical Information

Review of historical information is not strictly necessary, however, it can provide additional background that can help persons who are performing community assessments create a profile of the community. Chambers of commerce, local historical societies, and libraries are all likely to have general information on the community's background.

A brief review of a community's history can provide insight into how the community views itself -- and how much it has changed.

> *For example, was it originally a pioneer town, and does it still take pride in "the pioneer spirit?" Was it a factory town, and is it still? Did the labor movement or natural or man-made disasters make their mark, and are they still remembered? Has the population grown so rapidly that the past is essentially gone, and residents assume that their stay in the area will be only temporary?*

A quick review of a community's history can help the person performing an assessment discern whether residents' behavior is the continuation of a trend or a departure from the past.

Newspapers

Review of local newspapers can provide a wealth of information about all aspects of a community. Persons performing community assessments typically look at articles that specifically address the site, facility, or project in question. This is important, since it provides confirmation of what area residents have been told about the project. Such articles often identify groups or individuals who are concerned about a site or facility who can then be added to the list of interview subjects.

One shouldn't end the media search after gathering stories specific to the site or facility, however. One should look at all of the types of stories that appear in the newspaper. A critical review of the newspaper will not only reveal other community issues which may have an effect, directly or indirectly, on the project, it will also reveal the degree of cohesiveness or strife among segments of the community and mechanisms by which threats or conflicts are handled.

For example, a review of stories may indicate that most major issues are well addressed by the municipal government, and that residents look to public officials to handle problems. In other cases, it is clear that certain strong opinion leaders, who may represent different demographic or political segments of the population, come forward to address major issues. In some of these cases, regular clashes may occur among segments of the population; in other cases the community culture simply invests more power in certain opinion leaders than in the local government.

Review of stories will also indicate the degree to which community issues become politicized, and what form such politicization takes.

In cases of large newspapers, it may be possible to conduct an electronic search of past issues for stories that contain certain key words. Although this can be useful, one must know which key words to use. The person conducting an assessment may not have enough information at the beginning of the process to find stories that provide a good representation of community attitudes or behaviors. For example, searching for "Environmental Groups" may not yield information on any environmental organizations in the area. Instead, one would have to know the names of local organizations in order to find the stories that reference them.

Thus, data base searches can provide useful information, however, to obtain a more complete picture of the community, it is desirable to view several months worth of "hard copies" or microfilm of the local newspaper. Typically, scanning one to three months worth of issues for each of the past three years will provide a wealth of information and a "feel" for the community that can confirm the impressions gained during interviews. Some local libraries can provide a short cut in the form of clip files or subject files which include stories on certain topics. A review of these subject files, supplemented with some viewing of microfilm to obtain a "feel" for the prominence given to certain types of stories, can provide excellent information about the community and stakeholder groups.

IDENTIFYING APPROPRIATE METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

There are many methods for giving information and receiving input from stakeholders. In some communities, an effective communications program is very simple: one or two methods of communication, such as holding a public meeting or distributing fact sheets to immediate neighbors and opinion leaders, may be all that is necessary to communicate with everyone who is interested in a project.

In cases in which a community is segmented and the site or facility in question is of potential concern to a large and/or diverse population, extra effort is required to identify channels of communication that will reach all interested parties. For example, in the case of non-English speaking residents, materials may be translated into their native language and distributed via a local foreign language newspaper or service groups, churches, or key individuals who work with the particular non-English speaking population in question. Community and opinion leaders for each potentially affected population segment should be consulted regarding preferred communication methods.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the easiest way to determine what the appropriate methods of communication might be is to ask interview subjects how best to distribute information and solicit feedback. A review of local newspapers will also reveal important information, such as whether that community is particularly responsive to public meetings, and, if so, where they tend to be held. Review of the local newspaper may also indicate whether local churches or service organizations tend to host speeches and presentations, and how well attended these events tend to be, for additional outreach opportunities.

CONCLUSION

A well done community assessment can help community relations or public involvement specialists identify possible stakeholders for specific environmental projects. Additionally, the assessment process can provide a thorough understanding of environmental and community issues surrounding stakeholder interests or concerns so that they can be reflected in the public involvement program.

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