

CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY ADVISORY PANELS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

January, 1992
Revised November, 1993

Diane B. Sheridan
Public Policy Facilitator
4127 Rolling Green
Taylor Lake Village, Texas 77586-5107
713/326-5253 (phone)
713/326-2769 (FAX)

INTRODUCTION

The primary audience for this paper is plant managers considering the formation of a Community Advisory Panel. It should also be useful for facilitators and steering committee members.

Community advisory panels (CAPS) are an excellent means of getting involved with the community and carrying out Responsible Care, but they present a number of challenges. Before forming any community advisory panels, companies and steering committees should consider the following challenges faced by CAPS and the recommendations to address them. This paper is addressed primarily to companies considering forming CAPs.

There should be strong corporate support for the concept of a CAP, as well as delegation of authority for forming and managing the CAP to the site level. In other words, the company counsel and public relations staff should accept the CAP as an informal, non-public-relations method of interacting with the community. Top management should be willing to improve performance to address community concerns as often as possible. At the same time, the day-to-day authority for the CAP should rest with the site manager, whom the community sees as the plant authority.

If the plant is in close proximity to other petrochemical plants, consideration should be given to the need to establish a multi-company rather than single-company CAP. While single-company CAPS are almost always stronger, multi-company CAPS may be necessary where the community could not support a large number of single-company CAPS.

A number of challenges associated with CAPS follow, along with ideas for preventing or responding to the problem.

ASSURING DIVERSITY IN MEMBERSHIP AND VIEWS

Challenges

Companies that do not actively seek a group reflective of the community as a whole usually end up with a group that is composed of elected officials and pro-business community leaders. Those tend to be the people company managers know and the people known by elected officials and the Chamber of Commerce, to whom companies naturally turn for assistance in identifying members. Left out in the

DSW 137170

AVOIDING BEING SEEN AS AN INDUSTRY PAWN, APOLOGIST, OR CHEERLEADER

Challenges

The people who serve on your CAP will likely be aware of the inherent risk they take in associating with you. Some will be criticized routinely by people who think meeting with you cannot help but result in brainwashing. You will be criticized for using public relations rather than improved performance to solve your challenges. Any plant or company that has recently experienced a catastrophe will be doubly criticized. Any chemical industry catastrophe will heighten mistrust of your company.

Exacerbating these problems is the fact that company personnel may dominate the group in obvious or subtle ways, reinforcing the notion that one-way, you-to-them communication is what you really want. Dominance takes many forms: plant personnel monopolizing the conversation, bringing too many plant people either to the table or as observers, writing for the group, exercising editorial control, acting as media spokesperson for the CAP, changing the meeting notes to eliminate things unfavorable to you, pushing the group to take on a feel-good project, not letting the group set its own agenda, and outright lies or masking of unpleasant facts.

Dominance is also the message when you name yourself chair or leader of your own advisory group, or when you give yourself member-status so you can block things you don't want the group to do, such as appoint a wage employee to the CAP or bring in a speaker critical of industry.

Recommendations

To some extent, skepticism about the validity of the CAP and of your intentions is inevitable but you should not be complacent about it. You will need to tell the committee flat out that you do not want the CAP to be PR, which is essentially one-way communication where you are trying to influence the public to like you so you can make money. You will have to emphasize and demonstrate that you want a different kind of relationship, where there is two-way dialogue leading to your making efforts to address community concerns about your performance in the areas of health, safety, and the environment.

The group should consider the differences among public relations, community relations, community awareness, outreach, and true community involvement. The CAP should be the latter. PR and community relations are essential, but they are not the same as two-way dialogue addressing health, safety, and environmental issues and practices. Community relations efforts are appreciated by most everyone, but they do not focus on, for example, emissions. Community relations programs do not extend readily into CAPs because those who benefit from your largesse are naturally reluctant to share their concerns at the same time they are accepting your good will. Awareness is simply telling people who you are and what you do. Outreach is a favored term in the chemical industry, but it infers one-way communication, you-to-the-community.

Besides understanding distinctions such as these, the group should adopt groundrules that explicitly state that members are not expected to be spokespersons or cheerleaders for the company and that also lay out clearly what the company's role is and is not. Some groups state that they will not, as a group, take a formal position in support of or opposition to, industry expansions at, for example, a public hearing. This does not imply that the CAP should refrain from candidly expressing their displeasure or disapproval to you at CAP meetings.

When the company makes itself a member of its own advisory panel, it reduces the panel's ✓ credibility. I recommend that company management personnel participate as liaisons rather as members, allowing them to take part in dialogue but permitting the CAP to make decisions independently.

DSW 137171

groundrules are presented by the steering committee to the panel at the first panel meeting and adopted after panelists have an opportunity to revise them. Groundrules should be reexamined as needed or at least every two years or so.

Leadership in the CAP can be handled in several ways. If there is a facilitator, the facilitator will run meetings. Some CAPs with facilitators designate a member as media spokesperson; others rotate that role according to the subject of media attention. If the group chooses to have a chairperson, it helps if members wait to select a leader until they know each other and until they can decide what the leader should do. If there is both a facilitator and a chairperson, it is critical that their roles and responsibilities be clarified.

It is important not only to get organized but also to stay organized. The CAP should periodically evaluate its effectiveness and determine what is working and not working. Developing a plan of work for the coming year helps the group see that their long term concerns will make it to the table for discussion and helps members describe what the CAP is doing.

The use of subcommittees is valuable not only on an ad hoc basis but also to address concerns in greater depth than is permitted at a meeting. Ad hoc subcommittees may include membership committees to replace members and planning committees to draft a plan of work or handle logistics for an event. Such subcommittees bring their work to the full CAP for approval unless the CAP has given them authority to act without doing so. Full-time subcommittees may address issues such as emissions where some group members want to work with you to identify changes that could be made to address community concerns.

COMMUNICATING WITH THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE

Challenges

The CAP does not let the community know it exists and how to use it. The CAP is not recognized in the community as a forum for dealing with its concerns. Community members do not contact CAP members to share their questions or concerns. Also a problem is what is appropriate for a CAP to communicate to the community, and what it should not communicate. Determining how to deal with the community is awkward for CAP members, who often hesitate to announce their existence until they have some experience and understanding of why they exist.

Recommendations

Every group struggles for recognition, and so will the CAP. Community size and media outlets will affect the CAP's ability to become known. To expect it to become a household word is unrealistic; to allow it to exist without community knowledge endangers its credibility. If it is perceived as a cheerleader for the company, isolated from the community, it will have no credibility.

An effective way to reach out to the community is for each CAP member to ask 5-10 people for their questions and concerns about the company and their expectations of the CAP itself. This informal survey generates a lot of questions, helps the members assess how much support, skepticism, and criticism exist, and provides them with a group of people to continue to talk to about what the CAP is doing.

A formal news release is also recommended early on. It can include the mission and purposes, activities and plans, key information about operations from the groundrules, names of CAP members, names of sponsoring companies, and information about how to contact the CAP. To obtain coverage, it will probably have to be hand delivered to the media by a team of CAP members representative of the

DSW 137172

Lack of participation in conversation can also result from the above. It also comes when quiet people feel overwhelmed by the more talkative members of the group, be they from the company or the community. People also stop talking when their remarks are greeted defensively by the company, or when their question leads to a reply meant to "snow" them. A facilitator can help ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and is comfortable doing so.

Poor planning and communications also inhibit attendance. CAP members should know that they are controlling the agenda. They need a sense of what is coming up not only at the next meeting but also in the foreseeable future. Adequate notice of meetings is essential. Many use two meeting reminders as well as phone reminders. Plant managers have secretaries to remind them of their CAP meetings; CAP members seldom do.

Patience will overcome company resentment that citizens have asked for opportunities for input, but are not taking advantage of what the CAP provides. It will take time for people to decide whether or not you are sincere and determine how to behave in light of your newly found openness, assuming you are sincere.

RESPONSIBLE CARE AND IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

Challenges

Companies have not seriously determined how to use their CAPs to address the three themes of Responsible Care: a public commitment; actions, not words; continuously improving performance. In a plant community, Responsible Care will remain PR only, until companies improve their performance in response to community concerns.

The company sees the CAP as an opportunity to tell people about their operations and what they do for the community rather than as a means of identifying and resolving community concerns. The CAP is patient at first, but then members begin to question whether it is worth their time just to become better informed. Eventually, they drop out, conveying their disillusionment to a broader audience. Meanwhile, activists who feared the CAP would be "just PR" find their prophecy fulfilled.

Recommendations

Most companies that are forming CAPs are doing so because they believe it is a required element of the Community Awareness and Emergency Response Code of Management Practices. Whether required or not, formation of a CAP is certainly a good way to implement that code. More than that, a CAP is a means of ensuring that Responsible Care is the public commitment it claims to be, and that the public is considered in implementation of all codes.

CAPs should be given an overview of Responsible Care and provided with copies of the guiding principles as well as the actual codes of management practice. Companies should share their self-evaluations of compliance with all codes and work with the CAP to determine how the CAP should provide input into that evaluation. None of this will be easy to do, but more models will be available as companies and CAPs experiment in the coming year.

DSW 137173

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

A good steering committee needs to be diverse in its membership. It must have an environmentalist or activist on it. It is usually composed of at least two company people (plant manager; health/safety/environmental; or public relations) plus at least one community person more than the number of plant people. Six-to-eight is a nice size; eight-to-ten is tolerable.

The steering committee has four tasks: to decide whether the company's notion of forming a CAP is desirable and feasible; to develop a draft mission statement and groundrules for the CAP; and to select members of the CAP; and to choose a name for the group. It usually takes about five or six three-hour meetings to accomplish this.

The steering committee dissolves at the point that the CAP members are selected and the first meeting is held. Steering committee members typically are considered for CAP membership but are under no obligation to accept. When seeking steering committee members, tell them that, at this point, they are committing only to determining whether and how to form a CAP, not to service on it. In most cases, a few steering committee members become CAP members, providing some historical memory and stability. Other steering committee members complete their work but do not play any formal role in the CAP itself.

I recommend use of a neutral facilitator during the steering committee stage as well as for the panel. The steering committee can recommend whether or not to use a facilitator for the panel, and can determine who it shall be. It is harder for the facilitator to do a good job with a panel if he or she has not also facilitated the steering committee.

DSW 137174