

CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY ADVISORY PANELS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

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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

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process are usually those who are industry skeptics and critics: environmentalists, citizen activists, fence-line neighbors, young people, and so on. The challenge of establishing and maintaining diversity occurs when a CAP is being formed and again whenever members need to be replaced.

Recommendations

The assumption is that diversity in members will promote diversity in viewpoints, ensuring that a variety of community concerns will be brought to the table.

Select members reflective of the whole spectrum of community opinions about industry, leaning toward those who give the chemical industry its low rating. The spectrum might be characterized as ranging from those who are comfortable with big business and economic development (your supporters) to those who dislike big business and oppose development because it ruins the quality of life (your critics). In between are those who see both sides of the issue, who recognize the need for growth but want it to be controlled. They might be characterized as skeptics. Research on hazardous waste siting done by Dr. Michael Elliott of Georgia Tech identified these three groups as sponsors, guardians, and preservationists.

It is hard to get both supporters and critics to participate in a CAP. The business types see no need for it, as they assume it is in your best interests to do a good job; therefore, you will. In addition, they already have access to you. The preservationist types see no need to waste their time on you because they don't trust you to change, and they seldom find dialogue and collaboration to be effective. In the middle are a large number of people that might be viewed as industry skeptics, who usually like the chance to be both informed and involved. They are most easily attracted to a community advisory panel because they are curious about what you do and think they can make a difference by engaging in dialogue with you.

Diversity is not confined to one's views on the environment and the company. Other factors to consider, in no particular order, are age, gender, race, ethnicity, income level, educational background, the part of town a member lives in, political background, longevity in the community, and so on. A good steering committee can identify what is important in a specific community. Members' interests and the expertise that would be useful on the CAP are other considerations.

The public will respect a CAP more if it has wage employees on it, whether they are from your company or another. To include wage employees means either arranging for their attendance to be considered their job assignment for that time period or recognizing they will miss meetings due to work.

Several methods can be used to set up a diverse panel. A company can do it alone by pulling together a cross-section of people within the plant, including wage employees, to identify potential members. Alternately, a company can contract with a facilitator to research and interview prospective members, and perhaps select them. Or a company or facilitator may select a steering committee of opinion leaders in the community to help select the panel members. When the public greatly distrusts the company, the selection process and other organizational matters may have to be designed in a series of large public meetings. In general, the greater the distrust, the more publicly controlled the selection process must be.

My preference is a steering committee, whose work can be enhanced by some of the other methods. A steering committee ensures that community opinion leaders share your desire to form a CAP and that it is designed to address a variety of challenges. The worst method of selecting CAP members, which usually does not result in a diverse panel, is to have the plant manager and public relations person make the choice. Usually, they choose the company supporters as explained above. It is essential to have an environmentalist or community activist on the steering committee.

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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.

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Another way to curtail industry dominance is for the group to hire a facilitator. A facilitator works for the group, but is paid by the company. A third-party neutral facilitator can help the group organize its work, run the meetings, remind the group of its mission and groundrules when members stray into minefields, caution company people if they become domineering, and develop an agenda based on group input for the group's approval. If no facilitator is used, the leader selected by the group should be charged with these tasks, but will find them harder to carry out and will be unable to participate in the group, effectively preventing the "constituency" he or she represents from being heard. If the leader does not have good facilitation skills, he or she will impose personal views on the group.

The agenda for CAP meetings is a key indicator of whether the company is dominating the CAP or whether the CAP can select topics, formats, and speakers that would not be the company's choice. While it is important for the plant not to set the agenda, it is equally important for the plant manager to bring items to the CAP's attention about which they might otherwise be unaware. Having a portion of each meeting set aside for any updates that relate to the purpose of the CAP allows any member or the plant liaison to contribute items. Herein the plant manager would report on unplanned releases, planned events that will attract community attention, permits, inspections, and so on. If the CAP wants to pursue an item in more depth, they may choose to do so. If the issue is so important that they want it to supersede the night's planned agenda, they have the right to make that change.

The CAP also will have to be direct in addressing the PR issue, with members capable of stating to others why it is not "just PR." More importantly, they will have to be cautious when they relate as a group to the community so that they are not seen as industry spokespersons or apologists. Their job is not to go out into the community as part of a Speakers Bureau telling people not to worry about your emissions. As the committee learns more and becomes more comfortable with you, some people will be ready to do this and they will think they are pleasing you by doing so. It is often a company person who must disavow them of this notion. A facilitator can also help here, as can groundrules that clarify the roles.

Bringing in outside speakers can provide the group with independent information about topics of interest. Such speakers might either present information impartially or represent the anti-industry viewpoint. A panel discussion where a variety of views are presented is another way of ensuring access to information that is not biased toward industry.

GETTING ORGANIZED

Challenges

The group is unclear about why it exists, what it is to do, and how it is to operate. No one knows who the leader is. No provisions are made for replacing members who resign or how meetings are to be run. An undercurrent of unrest exists as a result, and the group gives mixed messages to the community about its structure, purposes, and activities. The company feels its time and resources are being wasted.

Recommendations

Remember that you are forming a new group, and all groups have to get organized to be effective. Organization takes time, and it is a process, not a project. The time spent in organizational development always pays off.

I recommend using a steering committee to develop a proposed mission and groundrules for the panel under the guidance of a facilitator who is knowledgeable about group process. These drafts can be shared with prospective panel members to give them a realistic sense of what they are getting into. All nominees then receive the same information about the group. The proposed mission and

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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

group's diversity. A few CAP members can draft the release but the whole group should approve it before it is sent. The company can provide secretarial and mailing support. A key question for the group to resolve is how people will contact them: personally, via a post office box, via phone, etc. It is not unusual for a group to need to meet a few times before they can carry out this task.

The logistics of issuing news releases are seldom smooth in a CAP. Some have found that it helps if the facilitator writes the first draft and a subcommittee of CAP members edits it and releases it. In any case, the control over the final "product" lies with CAP members, not industry and not the facilitator.

Having the media at the meeting is another means of generating news that will make the community aware of the group. A reporter should find it an excellent way to hear more than one side of an issue, resulting in more balanced coverage. Some groups have media as members.

At some point, a brochure and a plan for distributing it may be useful. A brochure that is too slick emphasizes the "just PR" image. Some CAPs take on projects that are visible to the community, but should avoid events or activities that look as if the CAP is promoting the company. On the other hand, a project might be beneficial if it resulted in reductions in emissions, as some recycling projects might.

PROMOTING MEMBER PARTICIPATION IN MEETINGS

Challenges

Members do not attend meetings. Members do not participate in discussion at meetings. The company becomes resentful that they have thrown a party and no one has come.

Recommendations

Have realistic expectations for the rate of attendance. This CAP is not going to be the highest priority in the lives of its members. Family, jobs, organizations in which members hold office, and so on can all prevent their attending a meeting. Nevertheless, members should attend as often as they can. People who don't show up several times in a row and don't let anyone know that they cannot attend usually need to be replaced.

Groundrules should address absences and replacements because these are inevitable and because they can be very irritating to manage. Most CAPs have indefinite terms for members. One effective method to weed out those who have not participated much is for the CAP to send each member a letter annually, requesting a renewal of commitment to participate. This gives those who are not attending a chance to drop out gracefully. In addition, the "new blood" rejuvenates the group and prevents members becoming too cozy with each other.

While some lack of participation is to be expected, there may be more serious challenges with attendance if people feel their participation is not worth the time it takes. This can occur when the communication is too one-sided, and the member feels the company is more interested in telling its story than it is in changing performance to address community concerns.

It is easy to blame lack of participation on apathy but it is important to recognize that what appears to be lack of interest is not always so. In a CAP community, apathy can be fear of retaliation for saying something negative to the biggest employers in town. It can be a sense of futility, a belief that industry does not care and will never change, so why bother with dialogue. It is also lack of time to do everything one feels is important. All of us live incredibly busy lives.

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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.

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PROVIDING ADVICE TO THE COMPANY

Challenges

A company that forms a CAP should be prepared to receive advice and to act to address the concerns they hear. Conversely, companies may be surprised to find that CAPs do not give direct advice as readily as one might expect.

Most CAP members want and need to learn a lot before they feel comfortable giving advice. While they may readily identify problems, they often feel inadequate in offering solutions. A panel without enough environmentalists and activists has difficulty knowing how to rebut a company reply or how to probe past the initial question. A panel with too many company supporters wants to talk about how to bring more jobs to the community rather than health, safety, and environmental issues that cause the company to be mistrusted. A panel replete with "titled" community leaders has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo in many cases, and fears publicity about unpleasant problems that might detract from the image they seek for the community.

Many panelists feel that discussion is futile and will remain suspicious of the company's intentions until you begin to change your performance in response to the concerns they express. Overall, there is a lot of education that takes place prior to much advice being given: education of the panel, and education of the company, if company liaisons are listening.

Recommendations

Be patient, honest, sincere, candid, and flexible. Appreciate the fact that most panelists want to give *informed* advice. Listen to what people are saying that is short of formal advice. Don't be afraid to tell the panel that you do not know the answer to a question; acknowledge their concern and tell them how and when you will seek the answer.

Tell panelists when you make changes to address the concerns you hear, so that they feel their ideas are worthwhile. They seldom can tell what changes you make unless you are explicit. Support adding environmentalists and activists if there are too few people knowledgeable about the issues and non-industry viewpoints. Don't fill the panel with titled people but rather seek opinion leaders who are willing to address concerns about, for example, emissions.

More than anything else, plant managers need to listen for underlying concerns and indirect advice. Explore the underlying concerns behind questions. Ask for clarification of what you think might be a suggestion for you to change your performance. For example, if you get a lot of questions about benzene emissions, recognize that people are worried about the impacts on their health from a chemical many know to be carcinogenic. Acknowledge that they want you to reduce your emissions even if they do not directly state that as a recommendation.

Don't form a CAP just to do a better job of telling people about yourself. Don't form one unless you intend to respond as often as you can by changing your performance to address the concerns you hear. The true measure of success of a CAP is your performance, not theirs.

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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.

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