

Executive Action

Urgent Information for Executive Decision making

June 22, 2011

TO: Executive Addressed

FR: James E. Lukaszewski, *ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA*

RE: Seven Behaviors That Cause Community Relations Programs to Fail

As we analyze, repair, and rehabilitate failing community relations programs in the U.S. and in other countries, we repeatedly notice patterns of suspect behavior and beliefs that often lead to trouble.

1. Unrealistic assessment of community attitudes:
 - Minimize their fears.
 - Trivialize their concerns.
 - Belittle their questions.
 - Ignore the unconvinced.
2. No prompt commitment to do what the community really expects:
 - Public meetings where you persuade them.
 - Provide "extra" data.
 - Answer their really crucial questions:
 - Is it really necessary?
 - Aren't there other alternatives?
 - What are the real risks?
 - Why disrupt our lives this way?
 - Why do you have to threaten everything we care about?
3. Decisions based on false assumptions:
 - It's PR's job to cover poor operational decisions.
 - Economic benefit is more important than beliefs or values.
 - Environmental benefit will outweigh fear of environmental threat.
 - The community needs it.
 - It will solve future community problems.
 - Good data will control emotional outbursts.
4. Heavy reliance on "PR" techniques:
 - Lots of advertising, mail, and newsletters.
 - Real focus on the "back door" instead of on door-to-door.
 - Get the Chamber of Commerce and your friends to endorse the project.
 - Use themes and messages that ignore real community fears, questions, and emotions.
5. Reluctance to be open with the community:
 - Be reactive.
 - Avoid listening.
 - Refuse to adapt your plans.
 - Start a third-party support group.
 - Keep the public in the dark as long as possible.
6. Assign community relationship-building responsibilities to people who don't care, are too technical, are poor communicators, or whom the community or activists won't respect.
7. No trustworthy, independent local oversight:
 - Opponents are demeaned, insulted, and held at a distance.
 - Neighbors are considered "kooks" and troublemakers.
 - Activists are in it "only to raise money for their cause."
 - Public officials are just looking for votes.
 - We can't let anyone look over our shoulder. They can't understand, or they might leak sensitive information

Converting these patterns of failure into positive planning checklists provides useful tools for redesigning more acceptable, credible, and successful community relations efforts. For more useful ideas, please visit our Web site at www.e911.com.