

EXPERIENCE SUMMARIES TLG CONSULTING HISTORY

CHAPTER 8:

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

TRAINING, PLANNING, FACILITATION, NEGOTIATION, STRATEGY

Developing effective community relationships is the difference between angry, protracted proceedings and positive, productive conversation, negotiation, and resolution of community issues. Community relations is often a relentless process of small incremental successes. Seemingly small, unimportant issues, if left unattended or unresolved, can and often do ignite neighborhoods, activist, and political opposition. Community relationships are built on trust and credibility.

Because poor community relations can be so costly, leadership from the most senior management levels is essential. In most instances, it is senior management that will be forced to negotiate, respond, and commit enormous amounts of time and resources to stabilize, then resolve deteriorating situations that in many cases could have been avoided or ended more promptly.

James E. Lukaszewski, *ABC, Fellow IABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, BEPS, Emeritus* coaches, counsels, and teaches the six pragmatic principles of effective, communications-based community relations:

1. **Openness:** We will talk; we will explain.
2. **Truthfulness:** We will be candid and honest.
3. **Responsiveness:** We will answer any question; we will anticipate and answer other key questions.
4. **Empathy:** We will act in caring, concerned ways before we talk.
5. **Transparency:** We will avoid foolishness and lay out all the facts promptly, or somebody else will.
6. **Engagement:** People-focused, face-to-face, often door-to-door action may be required:
 - Identify those individuals, neighbors, and community organizations most directly affected.
 - Begin to talk with those who care; invite others less directly affected, but interested – regulators, council members, legislators, other business leaders.
 - Establish routines for continuous dialogue, using face-to-face meetings, direct response techniques, and involvement.
 - De-emphasize media relations; let the media cover your appropriate behavior and actions.

The Lukaszewski Group delivered battle-tested, no-nonsense approaches to establishing and maintaining community relationships based on fairness, justice, and getting things done. We provided crucial counsel, advice, and direct management of complex, sensitive, highly volatile situations including:

- Adverse government/community political action
- Environmental permit opposition
- Media attacks
- Odor, noise, debris problems
- Organized opposition
- Outraged neighbors
- Prosecution/litigation
- Recovering employee support
- Unwanted plant expansions
- Upset worker

Our Approach

Ultimately, a company will be judged by the process it follows to talk with the individuals, groups, city councils, and neighborhoods around it. The company will also be held accountable to the words it uses in this conversation as the process leads to promises, agreements, justification, and explanation. Here are some techniques we use:

- Identify those issues that keep your neighbors up at night, fuel adverse visibility, and result in referendum votes.
- Assess the company's operations; look for useful, effective solutions to problems; question how and why the company makes decisions, then structure better methods.
- Establish a timeline for meeting with directly affected neighbors, groups, and community leaders; set a date, time, and agenda and stick to them; keep the process moving.
- Select company representatives to lead the conversation with the community; train these spokespersons for dealing with angry publics; support the spokesperson with operational and management expertise.
- Plan to move incrementally but relentlessly forward; it took people a while to get angry, it will take a while to listen and respond; help the process evolve.
- Keep the promises you make; support your claims with sound facts and explain from the neighbors' perspective.
- Create advisory groups who can "look over your shoulder" and comment with credibility.
- Be prepared for the ups and downs, the tugs and pulls of these very complicated, emotionally dominated situations.
- Correct and clarify everything.