

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Embracing Conflict and Opposition

This tool is about appreciating the value of engaging opponents with differing points of view. It is somewhat provocative to say that we must embrace conflict, because it arguably goes against human nature. Conflict is viewed by most as a negative experience and even risky business. So, why should you and your utility go looking for different points of view, conflict, or opponents? Isn't it bad enough that sometimes conflict finds you? First of all, conflicts and disputes can be useful. Relationships, organizations, and society would become stagnant if there were no disagreement or conflict. Conflict promotes interest and curiosity about an issue. It provides an opportunity for learning about problems, improving decisions, and increasing the value of outcomes. Expressing differences provides the creative impetus to continually improve relationships, organizations, and projects. By encouraging people to openly express ideas and differences, you are encouraging them to “join in” and create new ways to think and work together.

Another reason for embracing different points of view and conflict is to avoid dismissal of valuable alternatives or courses of action during community discourse. Specifically, we do not want Water Supply Replenishment to be dismissed simply because of the “yuck factor” or because the utility was unable to avoid organized opposition that resulted from *its own* behavior.

Admittedly it may be more accurate to say that we start by embracing those affected by issues or decisions, those with strong opinions, or those with different points of view about desirable outcomes than to say we look specifically to invite conflict at the beginning of a project. Using the following case studies, we intend to help you better understand and be more confident about outcomes when you conduct an open and fair public dialogue.

Summary

These stories illustrate several key principles and lessons:

- Sources of future conflict are visible early in a process of public discourse. They appear as differences of opinion, or parties with specific interests. Do not ignore these signs. Embrace them by developing deeper relationships with the appropriate groups and individuals.
- Embracing different points of view in a public dialogue can lead to higher value solutions, increased value and assets for the community, and an improved reputation or brand for the sponsoring organization. For example, look at the enhanced brand for the city of Santa Clara.
- Even with serious negative branding, an organization can turn things around by conducting an open dialogue with opponents and other interested parties, as illustrated in the Bonneville Power Authority case study. By applying these key principles in that case, a dam was decommissioned, transmission lines were built, land was redeveloped, and both organizational and personal brands were enhanced.

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Case Study I

Portland General Electric Dam Decommission

In the late 1990s, Portland General Electric (PGE) faced a decision. Continuing to operate the Bull Run Project for electricity would have required re-licensing by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). FERC would likely have added conditions to the new license which would have considerably raised the cost of operating the project, which supplies less than 1 percent of Portland's electricity needs. PGE decided not to re-license the project and proposed to decommission the dams and project operations.

When PGE proposed to decommission its 90-year-old hydropower project, few models existed for how to do it in an environmentally sensitive and cost-effective way. Environmental issues included protecting endangered salmon and preventing damage from the release of sediments accumulated behind the dams. PGE took the initiative to form a Decommissioning Working Group composed of representatives of government agencies, businesses and public interest groups. The Working Group jointly examined the complex policy, science and engineering issues. Then they developed a plan for decommissioning.

The Working Group negotiated a consensus agreement for a comprehensive approach to decommissioning that included removal of two dams and project operations, donation of project lands, measures to protect salmon and restore habitat, and transfer of water rights. The agreement also included a commitment to conduct ongoing monitoring and take action based on the results. The donated lands will form the heart of a scenic, 5,000-acre conservation and public recreation area, while the water rights transfer will ensure that 4 miles of the Little Sandy River will see water for the first time since 1912.

Case Study I Highlights and Lessons

Portland General Electric proactively led the federal and state government to solve any problems from their decision to decommission their dam. They analyzed who would be affected by the decision. They decided that they needed a formal process to reach a signed agreement with all those involved or affected. They continued to work with a large group of people throughout the process of gathering information on the effects of dam decommissioning, developing criteria for a good decision, and developing agreements. By involving the people who would be affected by their decision to decommission the dam, they took charge of the situation and provided collaborative leadership.

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Case Study 2 Bonneville Power Authority

When Peter Johnson was an executive in the private sector, he viewed conflict with company outsiders as, at best, an annoyance. But when Johnson became the administrator of Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) in Portland, Oregon, he realized that outsiders had the power to bring the organization down. To survive, BPA had to listen to the people affected by the agency's decisions – BPA's harshest critics. BPA had long been respected, but by the time Johnson arrived in 1981, the agency was reviled. People were put off by BPA's "father-knows-best" approach to decision making, whereby the agency first made decisions and then explained them. So Johnson took what many thought was an unimaginable risk. Despite the warnings of attorneys and his own deep apprehensions, he opened up BPA's decision making to the public.

"When I say we included outsiders in decision making, I'm referring to real involvement, with real changes in decision based on what we heard. By listening to people's concerns and soliciting their advice on how to reconcile vast differences of opinion and conflicting needs, our operations did not come to a screeching halt. On the contrary, by involving the public in the decision making process itself, we gained authority and legitimacy, avoided costly lawsuits and political challenges, and arrived at creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems."

BPA also realized that they had to incorporate these changes into the organization. They trained staff and changed organizational policies to require public involvement. They commissioned an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses at involving the public and committed resources and time to improving.

BPA began by inviting input and organizing meetings to solicit information on siting a power transmission line in Montana. The first attempts to involve BPA's critics were full of fireworks, but thanks to BPA's rock-solid commitment to public involvement, success soon followed. Soon they were meeting with ratepayers, environmental advocates, labor unions, and government staff.

Experiences early on proved to Johnson that involving the public in BPA's decision making was a practical alternative to litigation. Moreover, BPA's stakeholders – once the agency's adversaries – became BPA's partners in making better decisions. Instead of becoming mired in disputes and litigation, BPA hammered out agreements and got on with projects. They found that they made better decisions and that involving the public brought them a competitive advantage.

From the Harvard Business Review, January February 1993

Case Study 2 Highlights and Lessons

The Bonneville Power Authority (BPA) case study illustrates the ramifications of not managing differing points of view and conflict. Peter Johnson felt that the negative branding of BPA, and unresolved conflict, had the power to halt operations or even bring the organization down. Otherwise, he would not have been able to overcome his own apprehension about embracing opponents, and would not have gone against the advice of BPA's attorneys. This story truly addresses embracing conflict because BPA was opening up to the public in a climate of negative perceptions and opposition.

The case study brings to light what some organizations have to go through before they realize they must embrace their public and collaborate. It also illustrates the benefits of meaningful and extensive collaboration. Like many utilities, BPA saw its role as transmitting and marketing electrical power in the Northwest. They were competent engineers, planners, and managers – their strength was in their technical plans and solutions. However, they did not involve the public in planning and solving problems, and did not recognize that even the most well-developed and sound engineering proposals can meet resistance. This is because technology and cost do not address all of the issues and all public interests. They had to overcome the "we know best" approach. It was a tremendous help that Peter Johnson was understood the dire consequences of not changing.

BPA began to listen and learn, and not just as window dressing for decisions that had already been made, or projects that were going forward no matter what. They involved the public even when it seemed to take longer and when the dialogue was contentious. They learned from the public and made changes to plans and projects based on what they heard.

They also institutionalized public involvement within the organization. They realized that if one branch or division was not listening, or acting dismissively to the public, it would affect the legitimacy and brand of the whole organization. BPA added the ability to work productively with the public to the performance criteria for its staff. They required all managers to prepare public involvement plans for major projects. Finally, they trained top management on down to first line supervisors on how to organize public meetings, how to listen, and how to collaborate.

BPA's experience shows that a utility can completely turn around its reputation through collaborative leadership, and with a willingness to embrace conflict and opponents. Their story should be a lesson to water utilities proposing Water Supply Replenishment. It is best not to wait until your back is against the wall to make the necessary changes in how you behave. BPA and others have learned this lesson the hard way. Better to do it the easy way.

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Case Study 3

Santa Clara City Land Use

In 1996 the City of Santa Clara received a potential boon and a huge challenge. The State of California declared the 300-acre Agnew's Developmental Center surplus property. The property included 50 old and obsolete buildings, including what was originally California's first insane asylum. Declaring the land as surplus presented the City of Santa Clara's with its last opportunity to develop a major parcel of land.

However, many groups in the community had strong and conflicting opinions on what should be done with the prime property. Some citizens believed that the buildings should be preserved for their historic value. Other citizens wanted the city to maintain the social and health services that the city, county and state provided in the complex. Furthermore, the site was a nesting area for burrowing owls, an endangered species. Strong lobbies formed for historical preservation, environmental, Native American, business, and community service concerns.

City Manager Janet Sparacino oversaw an extensive, free and open public participation process to help the community reach consensus. The City of Santa Clara has citizen commissions that provide input on various citizen concerns.

Five of the 10 commissions held public meetings to provide input into the plan. Meanwhile, an advisory committee made up of residents, parents, staff and citizens from the Agnew's complex met and planned how to provide the same or a better level of community health services on the redeveloped property. The City, Sun Microsystems and environmental groups assessed the land for its arsenic contamination and developed plans to retain environmental resources while remediating the contamination. Finally, the City Council held many meetings to solicit citizen input early and throughout the planning process.

What was once a blighted area is now corporate headquarters of a major company (Sun Microsystems), restored historical buildings and a park that are available for public use, carefully preserved open space and wildlife habitat, facilities for day care and shelter for homeless families and seniors, and low-income housing. The area includes a growing Santa Clara neighborhood called Rivermark with 3,000 single family and multi-family homes, a commercial center with a full-service supermarket, a hotel, a new school, a fire station, a library and parks. In 2001, Santa Clara was named an "All-America City" by the National Civic League because of the city's successful resolution of community issues through the collaborative efforts of local business, government, schools and nonprofit organizations.

Case Study 3 Highlights and Lessons

Faced with a large redevelopment project, many cities and communities charge ahead hoping that over time community members will get used to new developments. However, these growth and development battles often get bogged down in land use decision appeals, litigation, and eventually community battles over every development move.

In the Santa Clara case, it was clear from the beginning that there were different points of view about what to do with the land, to the point where strong lobbies were formed. What was also clear is that if a fair process for considering these points of view was not conducted, the result would have been organized opposition, and possibly negative branding of the City and those involved in the decisions. This illustrates the fact that in many cases future conflict can be anticipated if we are paying attention. Ignoring these early signs is perilous.

The City of Santa Clara, and especially the City Manager, *did not* ignore the signs of conflict. They recognized that by reaching out to industry, citizens, environmentalists, and county and state staff, they could turn a potential battle into an opportunity to work together to create benefits for all. In other words, they could turn potential liabilities into relationship assets and valuable community assets. Through proactive public involvement and collaborative planning, the City quickly turned surplus property into financial and community resources, and a positive national brand for the city of Santa Clara.