

Managing Water Supply Replenishment

Executive Summary

Background

The purpose of Water Reuse Foundation project WRF-01-004 and the tools provided at the Water Supply Replenishment website is to help utilities ensure that Water Supply Replenishment (indirect potable reuse) get fair consideration as an option for increasing and enhancing water supplies. Water Supply Replenishment has many benefits, but also substantial barriers to overcome.

Benefits

- Increasing water supply
- Improving supply reliability
- Improving water quality
- Delivering financial benefits by leveraging existing infrastructure and past investments in the local water supply

Barriers

- The real and perceived risks associated with using purified wastewater as a source for replenishing the potable water supply
- Overcoming the “The Yuck Factor”
- The utility’s reputation and preparedness for managing the increased attention and political risks that come with proposing investment in a provocative course of action

Developing **trust in the sponsoring utility** is the key when it comes to overcoming these barriers.

Building Trust⁽¹⁾

Developing this trust will require that the utility understand and address four important ideas and objectives. These trust-building objectives are noted below, and provide the organizing structure for the tools developed for the Water Reuse Foundation project and the Water Supply Replenishment website.

- **Investing in Water Reliability** - The utility will need to lead a dialogue that explains the key factors that determine water reliability, the local need to invest in new water supplies, the options for developing new supplies, and the compelling benefits of Water Supply Replenishment. Simply stated, the utility must have something meaningful to say, be willing to listen, and be open to changing course within the bounds of solving the stated problem. The objective is for the community and policy makers to trust that the utility understands the important issues, has an open mind about alternatives, and is committed to investment in maintaining or enhancing water reliability.
- **Creating Water Quality Confidence** - The utility will need to create water quality confidence by becoming the source of quality, overcoming a common perception that the quality of the physical source is paramount. The objective is for the community to trust that the utility is capable of managing the real and perceived risks associated with using purified wastewater as a potable water source.
- **Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets** - Unresolved conflict, or fear of conflict, has been the primary cause for Water Supply Replenishment being discarded even in the face of compelling benefits. The objective is for the utility to find and engage opponents early in the dialogue with the community. Gaining their trust can lead to stronger relationships, ardent supporters, and higher value outcomes.
- **Ensuring a Good Policy Decision** - The decision whether or not to adopt Water Supply Replenishment will typically fall to some form of representative government. Consequently, most of the utility’s efforts need to be managed with an eye to this issue. The objective is for the utility to gain the trust of policy makers by demonstrating that it can manage conflict, and build a strong foundation of support among influential individuals and interest groups within the community.

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Relationships Between the Four Trust-Building Objectives

The four trust-building objectives are interrelated in that they are *all* focused on relationship building and managing conflict in a way that leads to better outcomes and increased trust in the utility. The ability of the utility to lead a meaningful dialogue about investing in water reliability will reduce the amount of disagreement or conflict. Clear and meaningful utility messages related to water reliability and water quality will help in developing relationships with potential opponents, which is a key aspect of conflict management. Ensuring a good policy decision requires that the utility understand and meet the needs of policy makers. This includes making them feel confident that conflict or disagreement will not escalate and become a political liability.

Given these relationships, it is fairly easy to see that there can be profound differences in outcomes depending on each utility's behavior. If the utility has articulated a compelling need to invest in new water supply, has established itself as the trusted source of quality, and has demonstrated the ability to constructively manage conflict, then there is a high probability that Water Supply Replenishment will get fair consideration. If the utility starts with overly detailed and confusing messages about a project, implements water quality management strategies and communications that are "business as usual," and has little or no conflict management track record, then there is a strong chance that Water Supply Replenishment will be discarded due to public perception issues. Outcomes can be very different even though the "technical" attributes of two different proposals are the same.

Resolving Important Issues

The Value of "Solving a Problem" - Describing the problem to be solved (the local need to invest in water supply and water reliability) provides the necessary context for the dialogue with the community. The magnitude of the problem will determine people's willingness to invest, the amount they will agree to invest, and the level of risk they are willing to accept. Asking people to drink purified wastewater because there is no place to dispose of it is a risky proposition, and has been an issue in cases where Water Supply Replenishment was rejected.

Because they are solution-oriented, utility staff members are inclined to talk about the solution (the project) when their audience has yet to fully appreciate the problem that needs to be solved. Because of this, utilities can be branded as committed to a "pet project" (they like to build things) versus being committed to creating value, or solving the problem. Water utility staff members are usually technical people who are charged with developing solutions, and as such, they focus on the solution because it relates to the difficult tasks of managing finances, design, construction and schedules.

The problem with this "solution focus" is that communications and relationship development efforts must focus on the *motivations* for taking action or investing in the first place. What is the underlying problem? What are all the options for solving the problem? Without this context of a compelling need and potential solutions, it is difficult for any community audience to trust the utility, effectively assess investment options, and determine acceptable risks. This is why it is critical to begin all communications with a simple description of the issues important to creating water supply reliability, and the specific water supply needs facing the community. Simply put, focusing on *motivations* provides the necessary context for discussing investment and acceptable risks, and brands the utility as committed to solving the problem, not building a "pet project."

Fresh from a Mountain Spring - There are several factors that contribute to people's perceptions that the physical source of the water is important in determining final water quality. Bottled water companies, for instance, tout their water sources. In many cases, the source is an important part of their brand, and typically relates to some protected natural spring or other natural source. Water utilities often are mistaken in trying to emphasize water sources in their communications, and make the connection between final water quality and the source of the water. All of this is misleading because water in its natural state is rarely acceptable for drinking given today's health standards. For example, spring water that is contaminated with cryptosporidium can be deadly.

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Adding to this people’s gut negative reaction to the idea of drinking water from a toilet, and concerns about the fact that municipal wastewater includes industrial wastes, personal care products, drugs, and other contaminants, it can be seen why people might be hesitant to embrace Water Supply Replenishment. Clearly, utilities must develop a significant amount of trust to overcome these perceptions and concerns. This is why “Creating Water Quality Confidence” is such an important trust-building objective. The good news is that we live in a society that accepts the capabilities of technology when the technology is managed by a credible organization. We also have case studies where utilities have addressed community concerns and become the trusted source of water quality.

Conflict Avoidance – People tend to avoid conflict, because it is stressful. However, avoiding conflict or attempting to stay “under the radar screen” can be disastrous when proposing Water Supply Replenishment. Why? Because this strategy can result in significant and organized conflict arising after major investments has already been made. At this point it is difficult for the sponsoring utility not to be perceived as “committed to the project” because significant dollars have been committed. Conflict that is not addressed very early in the process of communicating with the community can cost millions, will likely tarnish the reputation of the sponsoring agency, and will negatively impact future dialogue about investment. Utility managers need to understand the positive aspects of conflict, find opponents early, and develop relationships with them. The “Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets” trust-building objective focuses on these important issues.

Playing Politics – The relationship between water utility staff and politicians is an important one. Elected officials are extremely visible, which means they are exposed to risks to which the average person is not. This makes them very conscious of risk, and extremely wary of situations that could damage their reputation and limit future opportunities.

The challenge for the utility is to appreciate these issues and design relationship building and communication efforts that meet the needs of elected officials and policy makers. In fact, the primary context for developing communication programs should be ensuring a good policy decision, which means helping politicians minimize political risks. This objective requires that the utility manage conflict, and develop a strong foundation of support in the community for investing in new water supply, and adopting Water Supply Replenishment. “Ensuring a Good Policy Decision” is a critical trust-building objective because final outcomes will be determined by how safe policy makers feel, and how much they trust the utility to keep them out of trouble.

Using the Tools to Get Started

Advice Checklists – A good way to get started is to read and understand the advice checklists for each of the four trust-building objectives. These checklists provide a more detailed overview of the important issues and recommend specific actions and activities. They also can be used to audit communication programs and relationship-development efforts.

Executive Seminar – A major factor in determining success will relate to the utility’s willingness to make changes that follow the advice of the best practices and the tools. The Executive Seminar provides a collaborative environment where utility staff can gain a richer appreciation for the important issues, the appropriate utility responses, and the necessary changes facing their utility.

The WaterReuse Foundation Report – The WaterReuse Foundation Report “Best Practices for Managing Indirect Potable Reuse Projects” provides 25 best practices and analyzes 3 case studies of successful projects and 3 case studies where Water Supply Replenishment was not adopted. Reviewing the case studies allows the reader to appreciate real-world examples of how outcomes vary depending on the local issues and the behavior of the sponsoring utility.

The Remaining Tools – The rest of the tools provide more detailed insights into meeting the trust building objectives of Investing in Water Reliability, Creating Water Quality Confidence, Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets, and Ensuring a Good Policy Decision.

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Summary and Conclusions

At first glance these trust-building objectives may seem simple and straightforward, and things utilities must already be doing. However, it is arguably not typical for a utility to position itself as committed to investment in solving a problem (versus a project), and not typical for it to be perceived as the trusted source of water quality, no matter the physical source. Current perceptions of tap water are evidence of this. It is also not typical for utilities to look for conflict early in the dialogue with their community, be happy when they find it, and engage opponents by pursuing deeper relationships and resolving their concerns. In general, utility communications are still referred to as public education, and are not generally focused on ensuring a good policy decision. Proposing Water Supply Replenishment is not “business as usual,” and neither should be the utility’s value strategy and communication practices.