

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

Introduction

The Path of Least Risk - We addressed the reason why we should seek out opponents and those who disagree in the tool “Embracing Conflict and Opposition.” In this tool we address the process of identifying opponents and finding them early in the dialogue with the community. Finding conflict early reduces risk because there is still time to develop relationships with opponents, come to consensus, or alter the proposal if the opposition is determined and organized. Community capital and the reputation of the sponsoring utility face higher risks if opposition is found later, when detailed design or construction has already begun.

The Impact of Individual Opponents - Why is finding opponents more important than finding individual supporters? To answer this, we need to discuss the differences between an individual supporter and an individual opponent. Finding individual supporters typically has little impact on the policy decision and eventual outcomes unless they are influential in the community. Getting written support is important, but a single supporter will not motivate policy makers. The average person who is actually aware of a proposal or project, and is not an opponent, will generally fall into the category of a consenter. Consenters will typically not be interested in engaging in the dialogue because they have resigned themselves to the outcomes being proposed by the utility. They are not interested in spending time on the issue. Contrary to individual supporters or consenters, individual opponents can have a significant impact on outcomes for the following reasons:

- **Opponents are Willing to Engage** - Becoming an opponent takes energy and demonstrates a willingness to participate in the community dialogue
- **Conflict Attracts Attention and Creates New Leaders** - Individual opponents may have credentials or skills that others will respect and support, even if they have not previously held community leadership roles. Disagreement itself attracts attention, creating the opportunity for articulate individuals to attract followers, become new community leaders, and become influential very quickly.

Identifying Potential Opponents

This tool is designed to help utilities identify *individuals* who are likely to be opponents or energize conflict if the utility does not effectively engage with them. Simply stated, we are trying to generate a list of people with which to pursue relationships.

There are two basic types of identification processes that are important in seeking out potential opponents. The first process assumes that we can develop a list of specific individuals based on knowledge we already have, or can obtain without having met the person. For example, we may know that that a certain individual is a community activist, and has been involved in past conflicts. We do not need to communicate directly with this person in order to identify him or her. The second process involves holding events and designing communication content that gets those interested and concerned to identify themselves. This process is important because these individuals may otherwise be missed, or discovered late in the dialogue.

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

Knowledge-Based Identification

This process assumes that the utility has information, or can access information, that will allow them to identify individuals who might be potential opponents. These individuals will likely fall into the following categories:

- Those who are affected or interested by the by the project or proposal
- Those who have a political agenda or are community activists
- Those who are involved or have been involved in community conflicts

Identifying Those Affected or Interested - The utility will need to make a systematic effort to identify those affected or interested by the Water Supply Replenishment proposal. Those affected may not be pre-disposed to opposing the utility’s plans, but they are certainly more likely to become opponents if they feel they are not being heard. In the case of Water Supply Replenishment, the entire community, or a large part of the community, will be affected because they will be users of the water. If only a part of community will be affected, be careful of environmental justice issues, especially if those using the water have lower economic status or are predominantly members of a minority group. In either case, using the criterion of water users for identifying individuals is not very effective because the group is too big. There *are* ways to narrow this down by further analyzing who will likely be affected or interested.

- Those who are located near where the water supply replenishment infrastructure will be located, or where project construction could impact their quality of life.
- Groups who might have to pay more or perceive economic gains or losses.
- People who you know have social or public health concerns about water reuse. Those with social concerns may be people who worry that recycled water will lead to increased community growth. Those with public health concerns may be people who object to the project based on different values about risk, purity, and danger.
- People who tend to weigh in or be visible on controversial issues, especially those who tend to disagree with government or public sector proposals.

These categories provide insights about where to start looking, but how do you identify specific individuals? Some ideas include the following:

Ask the Staff in Your Utility

Send your preliminary list to staff. Ask them to add to the list based on their experience from living in the community and working on different projects.

Ask People with Whom You Are Developing Relationships

Find out from people currently on your list that you are already talking to. Ask them who the other people are who might be interested, affected, or concerned.

Use Information from Previous Public Involvement Efforts

Your utility may have been involved in another project that included public involvement or outreach. Look at those lists for individuals, groups, or organizations that might be interested or concerned about this project, or were past opponents.

Use Geographic Methods and Public Records

Look at the map and decide which areas will contain interested residents. After you identify the areas, put together a list of individuals from local government agencies or elected officials.

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

Hire a Facilitator to Conduct Convening Interviews and Analysis

Professional mediators can work with you to develop a list of community leaders. They will interview them to find out who would have concerns, or want to be involved in project planning, implementation discussions, or decisions.

Identifying Those Who Have a Political Agenda or are Community Activists - Identifying individuals in this group is more straightforward, with participants generally including the following:

- Staff of federal, state, and local government agencies
- Elected officials at all levels of government
- Highly visible leaders of organized groups or identifiable interests (for example, chamber of commerce, NAACP, Sierra Club)
- Membership of organized groups or identifiable interests (for example, homeowners in a particular area, economic development interests, minorities)

Identifying Those Who Have Been Involved in Conflict - Certainly those who are currently involved in community conflict should be candidates for the relationship development list. In this section, we explain why current conflict is likely to follow previous community divisions and trigger previous hot button issues. This fact allows us to identify important individuals that could be opponents or energize conflict.

Every community has a history of disagreements and disputes over economics, power and authority, race, class, and culture. Each time a new community issue emerges, perceptions of who was heard or ignored, or who “won or lost” in previous conflicts affects the dialogue and outcomes related to the new issue. For example, consider that a community group proposes building a new halfway house for recovering drug addicts. Residents of the neighborhood selected for the halfway house do not want it located in the area. The city steps in and locates the halfway house in another area where they have eminent domain. The participants, community group, neighborhood, and residents of the new location will all have opinions about how the decision was made, including who benefited because of economics, power, or access, and how race and class affected the outcome.

Each issue, whether over prayer in the schools or expanding the beltway around the city, can affect citizen’s perceptions of a water recycling proposal. It is important for the utility to understand this context and history so that it does not inadvertently re-energize previous conflict, and so it can identify individuals that may be important in the dialogue about water reuse. Following are some questions related to understanding the landscape of conflict in the community, identifying important individuals, and some simple reminders on how to avoid conflict that is unnecessary and unproductive.

Describe the Community

- What are the different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the community?
- Does your city or community have deep and historic divisions between racial groups, or between those on the “right side” and those on the “wrong side” of the tracks?
- Who are the group opinion leaders and community leaders who represent non-profits, community-based groups, or church groups?

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

- What do these individuals care about? What are their values, interests, and concerns?
- What are the alliances or coalitions between groups or organizations?
- Look at your proposal and assess whether anyone could accuse the project of benefiting some while others pay a disproportionate share of the costs.

Community History

- What involvement have community groups had in civic issues in the past - public outreach, education, organizing, public action?
- What disputes have emerged in the past - land use, development, locating a facility, public health, political corruption, community planning, crime control, police brutality, education?
- What have been the historical issues or concerns about water, wastewater, the water environment, water reuse, or the credibility of the utility? Who are the individuals that have been involved in these discussions or disputes?

In short, you are trying to identify the issues and the individuals that have energized conflict in the past. If you heard the headline on the community radio news this morning “Yet another example of x has stricken x community” what would the headline be about? Again look at the actions your utility has taken in planning the water replenishment project. Could anyone make the claim that your utility is following the same pattern? Could anyone use your project to fight its ongoing battle about growth, racism, or inside deal-making? Look at your project or proposal from their eyes.

Again, we are looking for the list of individuals that we need to put on our relationship development priority list.

Event or Communication-Based Identification

It is easy to think that buying a full-page newspaper ad or holding a public meeting is important in building support for a proposal or project, or has a significant impact on eventual outcomes. On the contrary, creating “consenters,” who have no other connection to the policy decision, will likely have little or no impact outcomes. Events and communications can make a big difference if they create knowledge that improves the utility’s proposal, and if they identify potential opponents who might have been missed without the communications piece or event. This is why utilities must purposely design events and communications to find previously unidentifiable individuals who may be interested, or affected enough to engage in the dialogue. To accomplish this, communications and events must *get people’s attention*. Constantly remembering this objective will help you design better events. Newspaper articles that stir up interest and concern are a good thing if they get more people engaged in the dialogue.

One way to get people’s attention is to make it clear that a decision is pending, and that the utility is seeking input before they make the decision. This suggests that the community will have input into the decision, and that they need to get involved now. The decision does not have to be a final determination whether or not Water Supply Replenishment will be adopted. Rather, the decision can be related to any milestone. The main point is that the event or communication piece should suggest that *there is reason to be interested and involved* if only because decisions are being made that will affect the future of the community. Many water utilities have historically tried to stay under the radar screen, but in this case we are trying to attract attention.

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

For example, a flier advertising a public meeting might read.....

Your local water utility has completed a preliminary planning analysis that indicates a need to develop new water supplies for the community. Developing these supplies will likely cause an increase in water rates. The utility has identified several options for resolving the water supply needs, including using recycled water to replenish the local groundwater and drinking water supply. The utility is seeking input from the community in order to decide which options will remain on the list of alternatives. A public meeting will be held at.....or contactat the utility to find out more and provide feedback.

This communication suggests that a decision is pending and that the input of the community is being considered in the decision. It also highlights the possibility of a rate increase and the potable reuse option to attract more attention. Here is a sample agenda for the public meeting:

NEW WATER SUPPLY PUBLIC MEETING AGENDA

5:30-6:00 Open House and Refreshments

- Get to know some of your utility leaders

6:00-6:15 Introductions

- Review the goal of the meeting

6:15-6:45 Water Supply Forecast and Shortfall

- Assumptions behind your water forecast model
- Results of the modeling

6:45-7:15 Questions - Water Supply Findings and Model

7:15-7:30 Options for Addressing the Water Supply Short Fall

- Pros and Cons of different approaches
- Use of recycled water to replenish the potable supply
- Rate impacts of the alternatives
- Schedule of upcoming decisions

8:00-8:30 Questions and Answers

- Community needs and concerns
- Utility action items based on community inputs

There are two goals for this meeting. The first is to inform the community about the problem. The second is to discover who is concerned or seems opposed to Water Supply Replenishment. An important component of this meeting is that the utility should have action items based on input from the community. Otherwise, the audience can legitimately argue that there was no purpose for them being present. One certain action item is that the utility will follow up with those who have concerns or are opposed to the utility's recommendations.

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Finding Opponents Early

Summary and Conclusions

The desired result of this tool is a comprehensive list of individuals who are likely sources of conflict or might be opponents. We have identified two ways to find these individuals. First, a knowledge-based approach taps into information that the utility already has or can obtain through analysis, public records, and asking other people they are talking to. Second, a communication and event-based approach uses communication and public meetings to *attract attention* and get those interested and concerned to identify themselves. We should always be searching for and identifying potential opponents. Once we have the list, the job of the utility is to develop relationships with the people on the list. Responding and developing relationships is covered in the tool “Responding to Conflict and Opposition.”