

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

## Introduction

The advice in this tool is inspired by how we in the water industry typically respond to opponents or industry gadflies. In many cases it can be frustrating to have to sit down and understand opponents' concerns and needs. In other tools, we have addressed why embracing conflict is so important, and how to find potential opponents early in the dialogue with the community. This tool addresses how utilities should respond to conflict, opponents, or those who disagree with their recommendations. Types of responses can include the following:

- Responding to people and their concerns in a public meeting or public environment
- Responding to people and their concerns by pursuing a deeper relationship
- Responding to opponents who appear unwilling to participate in a meaningful dialogue, or are unwilling to pursue a relationship with the utility

As a reminder, communicating is not “telling.” It is exchanging information such that two parties can come to a “common” understanding. This includes understanding the specific situation, and each other’s motivations, concerns, and perceived constraints.

## Responding in a Public Meeting or Public Environment

Not everyone has the personal makeup and skills to respond well to conflict, but everyone can improve. Read the following descriptions of situations and choose your response. Then read the analysis of the different responses to see how you did, and what you can learn.

### Situation 1:

**You’re at a public meeting. Joe Citizen gets up and accuses you of putting public health at risk by sending toilet water through the kitchen tap. You:**

- a. Explain, in as simple words as you can, all the steps the water goes through to ensure its purity including all the filtration methods, chemical reactions, testing, and other processes.
- b. Thank the citizen for his comments and offer to send him some materials that explain the entire purification process.
- c. Invite the citizen to tell you more about his concerns and why he has them, clearly take notes, and then respond to the specific points, indicating if possible something you can promise – right then – that you will do rapidly.
- d. Use an analogy to respond to the citizen’s fears. For example, explain how much less risk there is for him to drink this water than to get in his car and drive home.

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

## Situation I Analysis

*a. Explain, in as simple words as you can, all the steps the water goes through to ensure its purity including all the filtration methods, chemical reactions, testing, and other processes.*

**Positives** - The good thing about this response is that you will provide the citizen with technical information on the project.

**Negatives** - You do not know if information will resolve the citizen's concerns because you do not know the basis for his concerns. By starting off with a technical explanation, you are not being open and inviting and you might come across as condescending or patronizing.

*b. Thank the citizen for his comments and offer to send him some materials that explain the entire purification process.*

**Positives** - With this response you are thanking the citizen for his comments, and you are acknowledging and appreciating his (and likely others') concerns.

**Negatives** - Sending the person written materials suggests that you are not interested in a relationship with him, and appears to close off further inquiry or problem solving. During the meeting this can easily look like a brush off. This response also assumes that technical information adequately addresses a trust problem. Developing a relationship is what addresses the trust problem because it allows a concerned citizen to understand the utility's values, competencies, and diligence.

*c. Invite the citizen to tell you more about his concerns and why he has them, clearly take notes, and then respond to the specific points, indicating if possible something you can promise – right then – that you will do promptly.*

**Positives** - You are showing the person and other participants that you are interested about his specific concerns and want to engage in dialogue with the group.

**Negatives** - The only downside is that it takes time. It is probably time well spent.

*d. Use an analogy to respond to the citizen's fears. For example, explain how much less risk there is for him to drink this water than to get in his car and drive home.*

**Positives** - The good thing about this response is that you are trying to understand and address his fears. You are trying to demonstrate concern for the citizen's concerns.

**Negatives** - The downside is that risk comparisons are notoriously misunderstood and escalatory. People perceive risks very differently, so instead of being understood they may feel you are downplaying their concerns and shutting off conversation.

*Although answer c. above involves the most effort in the meeting, it is probably the best response because it begins with finding out in more detail what Joe Citizen is concerned about.*

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

## Situation 2:

**Citizens for Smart Growth, a coalition of community groups that has organized against reusing water, has begun a negative media campaign with letters to the editor, an op-ed, a press release, and a press conference. A reporter calls to get your response. You:**

- a. Say, “no comment,” so you will not risk being misquoted, which would only escalate the situation.
- b. Agree to send the reporter a detailed packet of information that will explain why the water will be safe.
- c. Take the time to carefully explain the science behind how the water will be purified.
- d. Tell the reporter you are concerned about the public’s reaction and are taking steps to learn more and respond to their concerns. Tell the reporter you will schedule a public meeting soon.

## Situation 2 Analysis

**First of all, we should treat the response to the media similar to a response in a public environment because your response will likely be aired. Here is the analysis of the responses.**

*a. Say, “no comment,” so you will not risk being misquoted, which would only escalate the situation.*

**Positives** - Not wanting to escalate the problem is a good goal and not wanting to be misquoted is a valid concern.

**Negatives** - Your "no comment" response will likely be perceived as having something to hide or protecting your backside. It also means that any news article will only contain the perspective of Citizens for Smart Growth. Even though you may want to avoid discussing this conflict, you should be proactive and constructive by discussing the situation.

*b. Agree to send the reporter a detailed packet of information that explains why the water will be safe.*

**Positives** - Information must be provided, of course.

**Negatives** - This response will be seen as bureaucratic and evasive, unless it is combined with approaches c and d below. Although Citizens for Smart Growth may want scientific and technical information, you do not yet know what information would satisfy their concerns or questions. In fact, providing only scientific information will likely not address all of their concerns. Only sending written material also signals the reporter that you want to engage in discussion of the issues. Furthermore, reporters are typically on a deadline – whatever you send her will not get there in time.

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

*c. Take the time to carefully explain the science behind how the water will be purified.*

**Positives** - The good thing about this response is that you are taking time and demonstrating genuine concern.

**Negatives** - The problem is that you do not actually know what Citizens for Smart Growth is really concerned about and what their information needs are. This response will likely be perceived as technocratic and unresponsive.

*d. Tell the reporter you are concerned about the public's reaction and are taking steps to learn more and respond to their concerns. Tell the reporter you will schedule a public meeting soon.*

**Positives** - This response demonstrates that you are concerned, that you want to learn more, and that you have a constructive plan. During the public meeting you can learn more about peoples' concerns and discuss what you can do to mitigate the negative impacts from the project.

**Negatives** - You have to plan a meeting designed to learn about the public's concerns and interests. If you just talk at citizens or allow a free-for-all, the public meeting will be ineffective and could backfire.

## Situation 3:

**At a meeting of the town council, you overhear three or four people talking angrily about drinking dirty water. One of them is Tom T. who has a reputation for making angry speeches at public meetings. You:**

- a. Go up to the group, introduce yourself, and offer to send them some materials to answer any questions they have.
- b. Go up to the group and offer to meet with them later in the week.
- c. Decide that in this case caution is the best strategy – better to say nothing, because you probably couldn't satisfy him anyway, and anything you did say would be twisted out of context.
- d. Mention the incident to one of the council members who is friendly with Tom T. and ask him if he would speak to his friend and try to get him to back off a bit.

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

## Situation 3 Analysis

*a. Go up to the group, introduce yourself, and offer to send them some materials to answer any questions they have.*

**Positives** - The good thing about this response is that you are introducing yourself to the group, which humanizes the utility.

**Negatives** - The downside is that sending the group technical information may not address their concerns. You do not know what their concerns are or even if technical information could help. Written materials do not develop trusting relationships, unless combined with an offer to meet with them as noted in response b.

*b. Go up to the group and offer to meet with them later in the week.*

**Positives** - This response demonstrates your interest in learning about the group's concerns and developing relationships. It shows you are taking them seriously. Tom T. may have a reputation for making angry speeches because no one listens to him when he speaks quietly. Or maybe he is just a rabble rouser – but he would not have a group gathered around him unless they also had real concerns.

**Negatives** - Very few. A downside is the extra time it will take, but it is time well spent. Caution might be warranted if Tom T. is suing the utility or likely to be violent.

*c. Decide that in this case caution is the best strategy – better to say nothing, because you probably couldn't satisfy him anyway, and anything you did say would be twisted out of context.*

**Positives** - It might make you feel better not to have to talk with Tom T. and his crowd, but this is not a legitimate positive.

**Negatives** - The problem with this strategy is that you will never find out what the groups' concerns are. Not engaging in discussion means that others will represent what the utility is planning, what they are motivated by, how decisions were reached, and what the science shows. Tom T. may have legitimate concerns, but unless you talk with him and others who are like-minded, you will not learn what these concerns are.

# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

*d. Mention the incident to one of the council members who is friendly with Tom T. and ask him if he would speak to his friend and try to get him to back off a bit.*

**Positives** - This approach might have some added value if combined with response b, and only if the council member can be trusted to not pressure or provoke Tom T.

**Negatives** - The problem with this strategy is that you are again not directly finding out what Tom T.'s concerns are, and you are not developing a relationship with him, or the group surrounding him. A member of the surrounding group might turn out to be more credible or formidable than Tom T., so you need to understand who they are and what they are concerned about. Never pass up an opportunity to identify and develop a relationship with an opponent.

## Responding by Pursuing Deeper Relationships

Overall, the appropriate response to disagreement or conflict is to develop relationships with the involved individuals. The best way to develop a relationship is to meet, and several times if necessary. A common theme of the recommended responses in the last section was that the utility needs to work to understand the concerns of the disagreeing party.

The following is an outline, or sample agenda, for a meeting between utility staff and concerned individuals. The people attending the meeting may not yet be “opponents,” they may just disagree on certain issues or have concerns about what the utility is proposing. The major difference between this meeting and other outreach meetings is that it assumes that the audience has some prior knowledge of the issues and the utility’s proposals, and that they have voiced concerns. This is a collaborative individual meeting or a small group meeting, not a public meeting. Clicking on the note/comment icons below provides reasoning and important background information related to conducting the meeting. These notes are a key part of this sample agenda and should be reviewed carefully.

### Relationship Building Meeting Sample Agenda



#### 9:00 – 9:30 Introductions

*Objective: Getting to know each other*

- Exchange Backgrounds and Interests



#### 9:30 – 10:30 Listening to Concerns of the Opponent

*Objective: Open dialogue to hear concerns from the meeting attendees*

- Do not Agree with the Problem Statement – Need for Investment
- Problem Statement is Unclear
- Do not Agree with the Water Supply Replenishment Recommendation
- Do not Feel the Utility is Looking at All Options
- Concerned About Water Quality Risks and the Utility’s Abilities to Manage Water Quality
- Concerned About Growth
- Environmental Justices Issues





# Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets


*Responding to Disagreement and Conflict*

## 10:30 – 11:30 Utility Response

*Objective: Utility conveys to attendees why they are recommending a specific approach*

- Water Supply Reliability Basics
- The Local Need for New Supply 
- Response to Growth Issue 
- Analysis of Options for Solving the Problem
- Logic for Recommending Water Supply Replenishment
- Discussing the Water Quality Plan – Water Quality Confidence

## 11:30 – 12:00 Remaining Concerns and Questions

*Objective: Develop list of action items, next steps and meetings* 

- Utility Action Items
- Next Meeting Date

## Responding to Opponents Who Are Unwilling to Pursue a Relationship

We have heard many times the stories of the irrational opponents and bad actors. These are people who are not willing to “listen to reason” or “have ulterior motives” and do not appear willing to pursue a relationship with the utility. Sometimes they just seem to want to stir up trouble. First of all, sometimes “bad actors” are reacting to a utility that has confusing messages, is unwilling to listen to alternative approaches, or clearly has no interest in developing a relationship with those that do not agree with them. On the other hand, bad actors will have a hard time gaining traction or having any impact on policy decisions if the utility has developed a strong foundation of support among community leaders, and has a track record of resolving the concerns of others.

If the utility has sincerely pursued a relationship with a difficult opponent, and they cannot be satisfied within given constraints, the utility can reach out to those they are likely to influence or gain as supporters. For example, a difficult opponent in a neighborhood group will lose influence if the utility effectively reaches out to the rest of the neighborhood. Marginalizing opponents should be a last resort. Our primary objective in this tool is not to help utilities become experts at isolating difficult opponents, but to help them conduct a well-managed community dialogue, and develop strong relationships with those who initially disagree.