

Turning Conflict and Opposition into Assets

Advice Checklist for Utilities

Step 1: Lead a Meaningful Community Dialogue

Reach out to those potentially affected and involve them in meaningful ways.

- **Carefully Select Utility Spokespeople** - Spokespeople should be employees of the utility, be committed to the need for investment, and have a genuine desire to have a meaningful dialogue with the community. They must be clear-spoken, not condescending, and have the authority to speak for the utility.
- **Provide Information for Participation and Sound Decisions** - Meaningful public participation requires timely and full access to information about proposals, problems, impacts, and alternatives. Those with the resources must produce this information and share it. Make sure that there are widely announced opportunities for comment on all documents and that people receive the documents well in advance of meetings.
- **Address the Process Needs of All Participants** - People understand issues, communicate, and make decisions in many different ways depending on gender, class, race, culture, religion, and education. The dialogue must include participants in the process design and address issues that may not be important to all parties.
- **Enable Members of the Public to Speak For Themselves** - Community members must articulate for themselves and in their own ways what their concerns and interests are.

Step 2: Embrace Differing Points of View and Listen

People with opposing points of view are paying attention, may have input that can improve the utility's proposal, and may ultimately become strong supporters.

- **Gather Diverse Opinions** - Actively seek out and understand different perspectives, concerns, suggestions, local expectations and needs, and different priorities.
- **Public Participation Should Have an Impact on Decisions** - The public's engagement should have an impact, or else they will believe that they are "window dressing" for decisions that are already made. Such 'non-effectual' participation de-legitimizes the process, sours relations, makes future interactions more difficult, and robs the utility of important information and creative ideas.
- **Assess the Community with Respect to Conflict** - All communities have a history of conflict, which can act as catalyst for conflict on new issues, especially if they are controversial. Assessing past conflict involves understanding what happened and who was involved. Those involved should be high on the utility's relationship-development list.
- **Find Opposing Points of View Early** - Finding opponents after major capital has been committed is a problem. Design communication efforts such that they find people with differing points of view. Highlight decision points early in the process to encourage opponents to identify themselves and engage.

Step 3: Develop Relationships with Opponents

When you find opponents, or people who disagree with the utility's recommendations, respond by pursuing a deeper relationship with them.

- **Pursue Individual Relationships** - The number of opponents, or those who lead groups of opponents, is usually not a large number of people, so utilities can and should pursue individual relationships.
- **Understand the Motivations and Needs of Opponents** - In order to foster a relationship, you have to listen. Seriously try to understand the motivations of opponents. Sometimes people just want to be heard. Listening also allows you to improve your messages and uncover flaws with your current proposal.
- **Make Sure Opponents Understand Your Constraints** - In developing relationships, both parties must come to understand the other's situation. Make sure that opponents understand the constraints that the utility is working under, or assuming. This helps them better understand your motivations. Working together, you may be able to remove constraints, or secure more investment.
- **Avoid Labeling Opponents as Irrational** - Marginalizing those who disagree without ever pursuing a relationship with them is the easy way out, unproductive, and risky. Pursuing a relationship allows you to better assess risks, and can turn a liability into a relationship asset.