You feel misunderstood? Under attack? Don't despair. There are ways out from under.

DAVE KLUG

Dealing with an "Irrational" Public

By Mildred S. Myers and S. Lee Jerrell

"People are irrational!" an executive exclaimed recently. His outburst was triggered by a pending regulation that would require chemical plants to tell nearby residents the potential "worst-case" scenarios should an accident occur at the plant. This plant manager believed that hearing about such scenarios would frighten the plant's neighbors and make them resentful of its very presence.

He described his dilemma this way: "I can make technically rational arguments in support of chemical processes that may have associated environmental risks. I can quantify the employment and tax benefits the plant brings to the community. I can show how productive uses of the chemicals outweigh the small, carefully monitored risks. But people are irrational about chemicals, so I don't see how I can talk to them about their fears."

Situations like this take on new significance today, when all of society's major institutions are met with public distrust and media scrutiny. A recent Roper Starch survey found

low levels of public trust in federal judges, cabinet officers, labor leaders, government officials, senators and congressional representatives, and—at the bottom of the list—executives of large corporations. Indeed, business is receiving more public and media attention than ever before, most of it negative. Nightly news broadcasts and weekly news magazines feature corporate CEOs who earn multimillion-dollar compensation packages while their companies eliminate thousands of jobs. As predictable as editorial fulminations against executive "greed" is the silence from the executive suite. Perhaps one reason why top executives have not publicly defended themselves is that they fear they can't present their position well to groups whose motivations differ greatly from their own.

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On other fronts, business executives who seek cooperation on regulatory and environmental issues frequently appeal to the community for support, often promising a specified number of new jobs in return. But the higher up the managerial ladder you advance, the more likely you are to find yourself facing irate environmentalists, community groups, government regulators, or—worst of all, say many executives—reporters who are covering your organization's relationships with one or more of these groups.

Many managers are not as adept at fulfilling these responsibilities as they are in their internal roles, for two main reasons. For one thing, it is difficult to explain logical and technical decisions to people who may have emotional, even irrational motivations. Second, in these settings, executives lack the control and authority that they command within their organizations.

Fortunately, techniques that are taught in executive media-training workshops can help you reduce the frustrations of external-constituency encounters and improve your chances for receiving a fair hearing. These techniques also work in this context because the challenges and pitfalls found in meetings with consumer, environmental, or political groups are identical to those that you would encounter in a news interview, namely:

- You are the "outsider" and, sometimes, the enemy.
- You don't have the power to set the agenda.
- You have no confidence that your responses will be understood correctly.
- Your audience focuses on emotional issues, not on logical explanation.

For many executives, the last of these potential pitfalls is the most difficult to overcome. In our personal lives, most of us learn almost instinctively that we can't solve emotional conflicts with a spouse, child, or friend by *lecturing* the other person about the logic of our viewpoint. We learn—sometimes through painful trial and error—to engage in a dialogue, from which we hope to reach some mutual understanding. Similarly, the key to gaining some control in interactions with community groups, politicians, or reporters is to keep these exchanges conversational.

In a news interview, the reporter asks a question, you answer, and then the reporter asks another question. The reporter may have planned a series of questions, but any journalist will tell you that your responses can change the line and content of the questioning. In other words, the act of communicating through conversation can bring about a change in approach and attitude.

Whether your goal is to persuade a local politician that the long-term tax and employment benefits of your proposed plant expansion outweigh the short-term costs or to explain to a board of education why it must make some hard choices among its conflicting educational and financial goals, progress toward the desired results comes through a series of conversations. The following techniques can help you assert some control over the situation and the outcome of this give-and-take.

Before the Meeting

Analyze the public's point of view. Your managerial perspective requires you to focus on shareholder interests. But most of the general public are neither corporate managers nor direct shareholders. The perceptions and responses of employees, consumers, customers, and taxpayers are likely to be very different from those which you espouse. For instance, before you talk about the need to reorganize around new technology, understand that for many listeners, new technology portends job losses, not new opportunities.

Develop your message statement. Build your message—the points you want the audience to learn and understand—by answering these questions:

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1) What is the question or issue, from the public's perspective? Is it a new opportunity that will help make the firm competitive and ensure future survival, or will it threaten existing jobs?
2) What is your answer to the question/position on the issue?
3) Why should the public believe you?

Provide an example or anecdote you can give to make the issue and your message real for people. Whenever possible, point to a circumstance in which similar actions led to positive results—the development of a newly competitive product or increased hiring.

Your goal is to develop a short, focused message that addresses people's concerns. Restrict yourself to a few (two or three) points that you want people to remember. Keep your language jargon-free, include at least one example or analogy that gives people a mental image to grasp, and heed this advice from chemistry Nobel laureate Roald Hoffmann [from his recent book *The Same and Not the Same*, (Columbia)]:

"If someone comes before you verbalizing anxiety over a chemical in the environment, don't harden your hearts and assume a scientistic, analytical stance. Open your hearts, think of one of your children waking at night from a nightmare of being run over by a locomotive. Would you tell him, 'Don't worry, the risk of you being bitten by a dog is greater'?"

During the meeting

This is a conversation, so look and sound conversational. People may be wary; they may see you as an outsider trying to exert power over them, unwilling to hear or deal with their heartfelt concerns. A lecturing or admonishing tone will reinforce that image, as will a stern or angry demeanor. Speak enthusiastically and energetically, but modulate your voice so that listeners hear appropriate concern and compassion. Look at people individually as you talk, and use your face and body to reinforce your spoken words. Unless the situation is dangerous or tragic, try to

What Do You Mean?

Translate technical jargon into conversational language.

Sometimes it's not people's fears that you have to overcome, it's their lack of expertise. Technobabble will not help them understand—you have to speak in plain English. Here's an example, using two pieces of computer terminology:

Q: What is RISC (Reduced Instruction Set Computing) technology?
A: It's a new microprocessor technology that uses a much smaller number of instructions to execute tasks, and as such it's much easier to program and to keep the software up to date.

Q: Can you give us a simple example of how this technology helps a relatively inexperienced computer user?
This answer might pass as "simple" for a business audience, but not for the general public:
A: It makes for a much faster machine. It will execute tasks you and I might have. For example, we might be working with a spreadsheet or a word-processing package. Many people are now networking computers together into local-area networks using a device as a server and a variety of devices hung off of that local-area network as client devices. That puts a strain or demand on that server device, and we've found that RISC technology is particularly effective in server machines because of the amount of processing that has to go on. It's basically a more powerful, faster, more versatile form of technology.

Q: For people who aren't computer experts, what's the difference between CISC (Complex Instruction Set Computing) and RISC technology?
Technology experts cringe at the following answer, but it's much more appropriate for a general audience than the "simple example" response above. It conveys a vivid image—here, people can visualize that RISC is a simpler process with fewer instructions, fewer movements, and therefore, faster results:
A: RISC is simpler than CISC. A RISC microprocessor functions with a much smaller number of instructions than a CISC microprocessor does. For example, say you have a dog, and you may want that dog to go get your morning newspaper for you, so you say, "Fido, go get the paper." You may also want the dog to retrieve your slippers, so you say, "Fido, please go get my slippers." Here, you've had to issue two commands. Wouldn't it be nice to just say, "Fido, go," and Fido would understand that he is supposed to bring you your slippers and your newspaper? It's much more economical, and it's much easier for you to keep Fido trained. **—M.S.M. and S.L.J.**

smile; at least, try not to frown belligerently. Use your hands to emphasize your words; for example, if you are saying that the risk factor is infinitesimal, your thumb and forefinger held close together will show how small it is.

Position information to your best advantage. People best remember the first and last parts of a chunk of information: Begin and end your statement with positive, persuasive points that you want people to grasp. In the middle, "sandwich" any necessary but less interesting data or issues you prefer to downplay.

Are nearby residents worried that runoff from your plant is contaminating the river? Don't just take a defensive stance and say, "We're within the health department's bacteria-count standards." Begin by pointing out that you—the plant's managers and employees—live in the community, too, and depend on the river for your water, too. (Such personal links help listeners regard you as a person they can trust.) Put the statistical confirmation of your compliance in the middle of your statement, and finish by inviting local residents to tour the plant and see your precautionary measures, your testing process. Ending with that invitation will leave listeners with the feeling that you have nothing to hide.

Control the time and sequence with "organizers" and "previews." You can structure your answer to a hostile question to give yourself time to defuse the issue and make your points in the order you want to make them. Say, "There are three reasons for that; let me explain them in turn." That up-front "organizer" statement buys you time to present your explanation in the order you choose, because courtesy requires your listeners to let you state the promised three reasons.

When a question demonstrates the questioner's lack of knowledge or understanding of the situation, it creates an opportunity for you to say, "Let me begin by clarifying the process, and then I'll answer your specific question." That "preview" statement gives you the chance to provide some background information to frame your answer more positively. (A cautionary note: Your "clarification" must be brief and easily understood, and once you've made it, you *must* address the question. If you don't, your attempted explanation will be perceived as attempted obfuscation, and you will *not* be happy with the results.)

"Bridge" from the question you are asked to the message you want people to hear. "How many people will lose their jobs in your restructuring?" Answer that 48 positions may be affected but some of the employees may be able to transfer into different divisions; then give specific examples of those possibilities. If the restructuring will result in cost reductions that will stave off an increase in customers' fees or enable you to keep a local facility open, bridge to that message as quickly as you can. If there is good news in the situation, be certain it truly is good news and not PR fluff, and then present it.

Use examples, anecdotes, analogies, and stories that will enable your listeners to see, in their "mind's eye," what you know intellectually. Are you asking for temporary tax relief for your new facility? Don't depend on your computerized spreadsheet projections of eventual payback. Supply that evidence on paper, but in your meetings with public officials, tell them success stories from other localities that share similar circumstances. People—even public officials—don't relate to printouts anywhere near as well as they do to personal stories.

These techniques enable you to move the discussion from someone else's starting points to those that you'd like to introduce or emphasize—a necessary and significant step toward achieving your goals. The last technique is especially important and undergirds the entire process, for little progress can be made to resolve an issue until the external constituencies know and understand your point of view.

The "conversational" techniques recommended here can help you achieve success in interactions with "irrational" publics. Use them to help your external constituencies see how your position can support theirs. In the process, you will strengthen your own role as a respected partner in the relationship. ■

Laughing Matters