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Developing public affairs counseling
 skills to support a public
 participation focus at Fernald

RT

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Dave,
 This paper
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ABSTRACT

To provide closer coordination between the Public Affairs Division and environmental restoration management and technical staff, the Fernald Environmental Restoration Management Corporation (FERMCO) matrixed Public Affairs staffers as counselors to project teams within FERMCO. Close coordination between technical staff and public affairs staff is essential for effective public communication in a public participation, environmental risk communication environment. Two-way symmetrical communication (public participation) represents a paradigm shift for public affairs staff who have developed skills primarily in a public information (asymmetrical communication) environment. While there has been much focus in the literature and workshops on management changes needed to support a public participation environment, less attention has been paid to identifying and developing the skills needed by public affairs professionals to support public participation. To support the new counseling role of public affairs staffers, FERMCO used a public affairs training consultant to design and deliver a workshop to initiate development of the skills needed for the public affairs counseling role. This paper describes FERMCO's matrixed counseling program and the training to develop public affairs counseling skills for the public participation environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is undergoing a major shift in mission from an emphasis on defense-related weapons production to a more diversified mission which includes a major environmental restoration focus. A substantial organizational culture change is taking place as part of the change in mission. Key elements of the culture change are a shift away from secrecy, which was necessary to the defense mission, toward a policy of openness with stakeholders and the public, and a commitment to public participation in DOE decision making. The DOE's Office of Environmental Management (EM) has identified public participation as an important element in successful achievement of the environmental restoration mission. Moreover, federal laws governing environmental restoration and environmental impacts at federal facilities almost universally require public involvement.

The DOE's Fernald facility has shifted from a production mission to an environmental restoration mission. There is high interest by local communities in the Fernald environmental restoration program. Clean-up decisions will directly affect well-being or perceived well-being of residents in the vicinity of the facility. Public participation, therefore, is essential to the success of Fernald's environmental restoration program.

In 1992, the DOE awarded a contract to FERMCO to manage the clean-up of the Fernald facility. Under the contract, FERMCO provides a variety of management support services to the DOE, including public affairs support. FERMCO operates under a matrix management system, with staff from technical divisions matrixed to the managers of project teams. Because much of the information which is important to public understanding of the Fernald clean-up originates with the project teams and because many of the

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decisions which potentially impact stakeholders originate at the project team level, management of the Public Affairs Division initiated a program to matrix public affairs staff to project teams as counselors.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In 1984, James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt postulated that organizations conduct communication with their stakeholders or publics in accord with one of four models.¹ The models are to a degree evolutionary in the sense that they represent increasing levels of sophistication and effectiveness and, as systematically applied organizational approaches, evolved sequentially. The models may be briefly described as follows:

Publicity/Press Agency: A one-way communication model in which the primary focus is on gaining name recognition and getting good news out.

Public Information: A one-way model in which the primary focus is getting factual information to interested publics, frequently through the news media.

Two-way Asymmetrical: A two-way model in which an effort is made to understand what is on the minds of interested publics in order to make persuasive communication more effective.

Two-way Symmetrical: A two-way model under which efforts are made to establish a dialogue so that an organization's actions and the interests of its stakeholders are more closely aligned.

Managers and public affairs professionals tend to adopt a set of assumptions about communication with internal and external publics which reflects one or another of these models. The model, in essence, constitutes a paradigm in the sense of Joel Arthur Barker.² It is an unwritten set of rules which governs the way the organization communicates with its publics. Each model tends to include a set of assumptions about how public opinion should be interpreted, about the extent of the organization's ability to deal with public opinion, and about appropriate ways to communicate with particular publics. For example, an agency operating under assumptions of the public information model might announce the decision to incinerate hazardous waste. Agency representatives might readily answer questions from the public in a public meeting. Faced with a public outcry against the decision, agency personnel lament the emotionalism of public response, the manipulation of the public by advocacy groups, and the sensationalization of coverage by the news media. The agency concludes that there is no reasoning with an irrational public. Faced with the same initial problem, an agency working from a public participation model would seek a dialogue with the public from the outset. By the time a decision was reached to use incineration as the waste disposal alternative, the most active publics would have accepted the decision. Along the way, concerns of advocacy groups will have been addressed to their satisfaction, emotional issues will have been treated as legitimate input, and the news media will have been treated as an important channel of communication between the agency and stakeholders.

The results of research on environmental risk communication suggest that agencies and companies managing environmental risk projects and issues will be most successful in their public communication efforts if they adopt the two-way symmetrical communication model. Risk communication recommendations emerging from the research include some strategies for how to talk about risks. For example, when a technological risk, such as groundwater contamination from a manufacturing plant, is compared with a natural risk, such as the risk of being struck by lightning, public outrage will be the predictable result unless it is made clear that the comparison is only intended to suggest the magnitude of risk, not the acceptability of the risk. Other recommendations, however, have to do with the risk management organization's decision-making process. Publics tend to perceive less risk when they feel that they have control over the risk decision and that an organization's decision-making process is responsive to their concerns.³ Shared control and responsiveness imply a two-way symmetrical communication process. For organizations dealing with environmental risk issues, therefore, Grunig's proposition that the two-way symmetrical model should be

normative for excellent public communication would appear to be substantiated by risk communication research.⁴

In nearly four years of observation of public involvement activities on the DOE's Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) Project, the senior author has found the symmetrical communication model and risk communication theory to have greater explanatory power for project communication outcomes than asymmetrical models. Recent communications experience at Fernald substantiates this finding. More importantly, the symmetrical communication model is a more powerful means for planning effective public communication.⁵

Organizations, however, do not always select the most logical or appropriate communication model.⁶ Rather, they select a model which reflects the underlying assumptions of the dominant management coalition. Public affairs and communication professionals within the organization, in most cases, will reflect a compatible communication approach. For an organization to shift from an asymmetrical to a symmetrical communication model, therefore, requires significant changes in underlying communication assumptions by both managers and public affairs professionals. The change is, in essence, a paradigm shift. The values, assumptions, rules, and jargon of the asymmetrical communication models interfere with adoption of the symmetrical model. The more powerful values, assumptions, rules, and jargon of the symmetrical model must substantially replace the older model before the organization can fully implement the new model.

At DOE Headquarters, the EM organization has taken substantial steps to facilitate a management transition to the public participation (two way symmetrical) model. Through quarterly public participation workshops, public participation training for managers, and implementation of a public participation policy, EM management has sought to shift the DOE's environmental restoration program toward public participation. Under the current administration, the Public Affairs Office is taking steps to broaden the adaptation of public participation values throughout DOE. For this shift between communication models to be effective, however, public affairs staffs must make a complementary shift in their communication paradigm.

PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMPETENCIES FOR THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PARADIGM

To be effective agents in the shift to consensus-building public participation, public affairs professionals who have learned their skills in a public information environment must develop new professional competencies. Most of the public affairs staff of Fernald and its primary contractor, FERMCO, gained their experience in a public information environment. The public information environment places primary emphasis on the communication technician role. Competencies required include journalistic writing and editing, publication layout and production management, graphics design, electronic communication production (audio and video tapes), media relations, speakers' bureau management, and related skills. The strong media relations focus of the public information model is reflected in the tendency of organizations that practice this model to prefer hiring former journalists for their public affairs staff. The public information model is so prevalent in organizations that manager who are unfamiliar with other models often think of public affairs as being synonymous with media relations.

Under the public participation model, public affairs management and staff must play a more strategic role in the organization's internal and public communication. In particular, they play a significant role in maintaining the organization's public participation focus by serving as internal advocates for the public perspective and as counselors to management to develop processes which identify meaningful schedules and channels for public involvement in decision making.

To carry out the expanded and more responsible role, public affairs staff must develop competencies in small group communication formats, facilitation, negotiation, internal consultancy, opinion research, measurement and evaluation of communication effectiveness, advocacy, and dispute resolution. In programs involving environmental or public health issues, an understanding of risk communication is also needed. The

competency levels of public affairs staff appear to have a direct relationship on the ability of the public affairs manager to become part of the dominant management coalition. Involvement of the public affairs manager in the dominant coalition, in turn, significantly increases the organization's ability to maintain a public participation focus.⁴

NEEDS ANALYSIS

In preparation for design of a workshop to begin developing the public affairs competencies needed to support a public participation communication model at FERMCO, a needs assessment was conducted in July 1993. To develop an understanding of the organizational context in which the public affairs counseling program operates and of the level of professionalism represented among the public affairs counselors, the workshop designer conducted 11 interviews, a focus group with public affairs counselors and back up counselors, and a written survey of 16 items. Interviews crossed organizational and functional lines, including DOE public affairs and branch management, FERMCO public affairs and technical management, and organizational development and training management. Eight members of the public affairs staff participated in the focus group. Eleven members of public affairs management and staff responded to the survey.

The needs assessment, conducted some seven months after initiation of the counselor program, confirmed wide satisfaction with the program by technical management, public affairs management and staff, and DOE public affairs and technical management. At the same time, the assessment confirmed uncertainty about the appropriate role of counselors. Overall, technical managers tended to see public affairs staff as communication technicians. There was some pressure to divert the public affairs resource to a technical editing role, diluting their effectiveness in supporting public involvement and public communication. (Some project teams have since hired technical editors to fill that role.) Counselors varied in the degree to which they felt they had opportunities to function in a truly counseling role.

The FERMCO public affairs staff, including staff selected for the role of counselor or back-up counselor, encompassed a broad range of experience and backgrounds. Education ranged from some undergraduate college to completion of the master's degree. Experience in the field ranged from less than a year to more than 20 years (generally at the management level). While there was a marginal predominance of degrees in communication fields, college background also included business, social sciences, fine arts, and physical sciences. Five of the 11 respondents to the written survey belonged to Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Professional society membership beyond PRSA was limited, with a single respondent accounting for the overwhelming majority of other memberships.

WORKSHOP DESIGN

A public affairs counseling workshop was designed based on several factors. First, the designer reviewed the literature on the differences between public information and public participation competencies required for public affairs staff. Second, the designer reviewed the literature on public relations counseling competencies. Third, the designer incorporated results of the needs assessment.

The principle objectives of the workshop were to

1. raise awareness of the skills and competencies required of public affairs professionals in a public participation environment,
2. help participants identify their current competencies in key areas,
3. begin developing a group definition of the counselor role, and
4. formulate individual staff plans and commitments for continuing development of required competencies.

The competencies required of public affairs professionals to support a public participation program are broad. It was recognized that a single workshop would not be sufficient to develop the range of problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiation, facilitation, coaching, and risk communication skills needed to support a major public participation program. Therefore, the workshop focused on developing awareness of the communication models and the competencies associated with each, on refining the definition of the counseling role within the division, and on starting to plan for individual self development beyond the workshop.

During the day-and-a-half workshop, the communication models, including variations on the public participation model postulated by James L. Creighton, were discussed in the context of paradigm shifts.⁶ In particular, attention was paid to barriers to paradigm shifts in organizations, the underlying assumptions of each paradigm, the kinds of objectives characteristic of each paradigm, the public affairs practitioner roles, and public affairs tools and techniques under each paradigm. Discussion focused in particular on the public information model and two variations of the public participation model -- the procedural public participation model and the full public participation model. Procedural public participation, as described by Creighton, is most typically illustrated by the procedures generally followed by federal agencies to comply with the public involvement requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. Under this act, federal agencies, when preparing an environmental impact statement, are required to provide formal opportunities, in the form of hearings and comment periods, for the public to have input to the decision making process. Creighton terms this "procedural" public participation because the public often perceives that the hearing process is a formality undertaken by the agency to comply with the law after the action decision has been made.⁶ Creighton further suggests that for decisions to count today, the public increasingly demands a genuine consensus seeking or negotiation process.

The concepts addressed in this segment of the workshop are central to the issue of moving an organization, particularly one so large and complex as the Department of Energy, from a public information model to a public participation model. The fundamental difference between the two models is the direction of the communication effort. In the public information model, the organization directs its communication focus outward in an effort to influence the external environment. The intent is to render the environment more favorable to the organization by either developing support for, or at minimum, neutralizing opposition to the organization's activities. Under the public participation model, the objective is to create two-way communication channels so that the organization can better adjust its activities to the external environment and at the same time influence that environment. The shift from a one-way focus to a two-way focus is a difficult one requiring that both managers and public affairs staff think differently about the timing, purpose, and nature of communication.

For example, under a public information approach, a manager might set as an objective, "To inform the public of the organization's planned action to gain their support." Under a public participation environment, the objective might be, "To involve the public in defining the problem more clearly, identifying alternatives, and selecting a solution that best serves the needs of all stakeholders." Implementing the public information objective places high value on writing and media relations skills. It may focus primarily on using the news media as an information channel, though public meetings might also be used. Implementing the public participation objective requires an understanding of organizational communication to address the key issue of "How can we create a responsive internal process?" It requires an understanding of strategies for identifying stakeholders and involving them in constructive dialogue through advisory groups, round table discussions, coffee klatches, or other interactive discussion channels.

In the public participation environment, communication becomes more complex. This demands a higher level of professionalism of the public affairs professional. The practitioner must be familiar with a broader range of communication techniques than required for the public information approach. Public affairs must be engaged in the management dialogue about schedules, resource allocation, and key activity decisions. The practitioner must be able to offer mature advice on when public involvement is appropriate and when it is not needed. The counsel offered must be respectful of the organization's obligation to carry out its mission and of the public's right to have its interests served.

When the public affairs professional enters the counselor role, the risks become higher. The counselor must develop the ability to represent the public interest or present the concerns of the public effectively to management without appearing to be against the organization. Hence the need to develop conflict resolution and problem solving skills in order to support management in opening up solutions to problems raised by the public.

After addressing the different models of communication, the workshop focused particularly on the concept of professionalism as the mastery of a body of knowledge. The public participation model requires broad knowledge of the public affairs body of knowledge. Mastery of that body of knowledge is essential to the development of management confidence in the practitioner. This confidence is in turn necessary for the acceptance of the public affairs staff in the counseling role. In addition, a problem solving model was presented, and conflict resolution styles were addressed. The issue of developing the skills of internal influence to support public participation was also addressed.

DEFINING THE COUNSELOR ROLE

During the second morning of the workshop, a facilitated discussion of the counselor role was conducted. Public affairs staff identified two sets of counseling roles, one set which could be labelled a liaison role and the other a counseling role. The liaison role included serving as a communication link between the Public Affairs Division and the project team and a variety of communication technician tasks such as news release writing, document editing, and bringing back assignments to specialists such as graphic artists. The counselor role was seen to include knowing the regulatory requirements for public participation, providing advice on the timing of public participation, planning public participation activities and events, monitoring public concerns and issues, amplifying public concerns, coordinating with the DOE branch chief, and avoiding duplication of effort or dropped balls.

The workshop was delivered twice so that all members of the division would have an opportunity to attend. Since the entire division was not present in one session, no attempt was made to reach a single definition of the counselor role. Flip chart notes on the role definition from both workshop groups were left with the division. The division is currently working with an outside facilitator to develop a definition of the counseling role which is satisfactory to the public affairs division staff and to the technical managers with whom the counselors are matrixed. Greater understanding of management's expectations of counselors was determined to be a prerequisite for developing a workable counselor definition. Accordingly, the facilitator is currently conducting interviews with technical managers to gain this perspective. Preliminary results of this research corroborate the workshop needs assessment findings regarding management attitudes about public affairs' role on the project team. It is recognized that for the public participation model to work at Fernald, management's understanding of public affairs' changing role within the organization will need to be developed.

APPLICATION TO OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

The counseling structure adopted by the FERMCO Public Affairs Division is believed to be an applicable model for other organizations attempting to implement a two-way symmetrical communication model. Success of the two-way communication model is postulated to be strongly influenced by participation of the public affairs manager in the dominant management coalition of the organization. In a matrixed organization, management decision making is more diffuse than in a hierarchically managed organization. Public affairs, therefore, is more likely to have the influence needed to support the two-way symmetrical model if public affairs staff are matrixed to the key management decision points.

For public affairs staff to be effective in the counseling role, an active effort must be made to develop the level of professionalism of the staff beyond the communication technician role most commonly found in organizations operating in the public information model, or other asymmetrical models. Training should focus on developing awareness of the different models of public participation, characteristics of a profession, the public affairs/public relations body of knowledge, and specific skills required for counseling.

On the DOE's Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action (UMTRA) Project, a project with a mature public involvement program, the public affairs training program pioneered at Fernald is currently being adapted as a staff professional development activity. Elements of the training are being delivered in shorter segments over a period of three months to minimize impact on ongoing tasks.

SUMMARY

An organizational commitment by the DOE to involve the public in environmental restoration decisions at Fernald and other facilities requires a shift in the way managers and public affairs staff think about their communication with the public. Two-way symmetrical communication channels must be developed to replace the historical one-way channels. This requires public affairs staff to develop broader communication skills and to learn to effectively counsel management to ensure that public involvement is timely and meaningful. At Fernald, a workshop was designed and delivered to Public Affairs Division staff to develop awareness and skills needed to serve in the public affairs counselor roles. Counselors are matrixed to technical project teams. The matrixed counseling approach is appropriate in a public participation environment in which decision making is diffused through a matrixed management system.

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