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Local Boards – Working Together

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

Capacity–Building Skills for Public Officials

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# LOCAL BOARDS — WORKING TOGETHER

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**CAPACITY-BUILDING SKILLS  
FOR  
PUBLIC OFFICIALS**

# **LOCAL BOARDS — WORKING TOGETHER**



*Objectives of this bulletin:*

1. To present both interpersonal skills and structural information in areas such as:
  - a. communications
  - b. personality problems
  - c. developing committees
  - d. handling meetings
2. To demonstrate ways in which appropriate skills can facilitate effective interactions on local governmental boards, commissions and councils

**While the focus of these bulletins is the public official, the material covered is appropriate for all Extension audiences.**

## **I. Introduction**

Even with the best of intentions on the part of all members, putting a group together on a board or council brings its share of problems. So many personalities, backgrounds and lifestyles do not combine easily. The individual members need to be patient and understanding, and they need to develop particular skills with organizational techniques to be effective.

One major area that can cause problems is the level of communication among officials. Some people seem to communicate entirely too much, though not always effectively, and others are rarely heard from. Either extreme is frustrating and limits the progress of the whole group.

Sometimes the communication problem is a matter of personality. There are people who, one way or another, are hard to get along with. Trying to cope with fellow members who are hard to understand or who have abrasive or negative personalities makes serving on local boards a difficult task at times. Few of us are comfortable with such people, but it is possible to develop some techniques to cope with them. You cannot change other individuals, but you can learn to change your approach, and possibly your attitude toward them as well. Developing an effectively functioning board includes learning to get along with troublesome people.

When local boards work together well, they usually have a good committee system. Organizations can easily become top-heavy with committees, maintaining too many of them or including too many members on each committee. Committees will work best when tasks are carefully matched with particular personalities. Though members vary in their individual

strengths and knowledge, they must have the ability to work compatibly to reinforce one another.

The final area to be considered in learning to work together concerns conducting the public meeting. Although the present leader conducts the meeting, any member may be elected to that office in the next term, so everyone on the local board needs to know how to conduct an effective meeting. Pleasant, well run meetings that accomplish their goals enhance the local team's ability to develop and maintain good working relations.

## **II. Communication**

"George is so hard to work with! He's a nice enough fellow, when you get to know him, but he never lets anyone know what he is thinking. When he finally does express something, he won't explain his reasons for his opinion. I never know how to deal with him at board meetings!"

This description of a fellow board member expresses the frustration felt by people who must interact with others who don't—or won't—share their thoughts and the rationale for them. Such reluctance puts a real burden on the other members. Relations among people who find themselves sharing responsibilities as local decision makers can be complex and sometimes difficult. Those who use good communication and outgoing, cooperative behavior help everyone to enjoy his or her role and to accomplish his or her goals with some ease.

Communication on local governmental boards and councils is the glue that holds the board together. It involves "attending" to others, listening as well as speaking. When we listen with an open mind and refrain from using "selective listening," we don't always hear

what we want to hear! However, we do hear what is actually there to be heard. Although it may not always bring us comfort to be an open listener, it will bring us a greater understanding of the thoughts and feelings of those around us.<sup>1</sup>

Communication also involves our interpreting what others say and their interpreting our messages. George, in the example above, is definitely sending messages even though he doesn't talk much. But the question always is, what message is he giving? He may, by his reticence, be telling the others that he simply doesn't have an opinion much of the time. That is one interpretation of his silence. He may be saying that he isn't much interested in what goes on at board meetings. He could also be saying that he is quiet because he is shy. He could be silent because he lacks an adequate vocabulary with which to express himself. More interpretations of George's silence are possible, but already we have several very different potential answers because George is not communicating in a way that even narrows down the possibilities. No wonder his colleague is frustrated!

Good communication needs to be as open and straightforward as possible. It is necessary to try to reduce the opportunities for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. An effective listener needs to attempt to aid the speaker by asking open-ended questions whenever this would lead to greater understanding. The listener needs to reserve judgment until the speaker has had full opportunity to express her/himself. A good listener also checks for clarity and understanding by restating or summarizing the speaker's main points. The listener can ask, "Would you say that last

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<sup>1</sup>Refer to Extension Bulletin E-1915, "Express Yourself (Without Turning Others Off!)"

part again a bit differently, please? I didn't quite understand it." Or, "I think what you're saying is . . . . Did I understand you correctly?" Such restating can save many later misunderstandings by all parties.

Effective communication tends to validate all parties. It includes—rather than excludes—shows respect, clarifies and provides a direct and honest base for further interaction.

Much of communication involves not just what is said but also how it is said. As the words of the speaker need to be pertinent to the interaction, other elements must also be fitting. For example, the appropriateness and degree of sincerity of the speaker; the tone of voice used; the attention given to the interaction; and the use of "body language"—gestures, eye contact, etc.—all tell whether the speaker is really "with us" in the communication. It gives the listener additional feedback, beyond the words themselves, to help him/her determine whether to respond with trust or suspicion and to accept or reject the speaker's message.<sup>2</sup>

Effective communication involves mutually open and honest behavior between two or more people. This behavior attempts to share ideas, feelings or information as is appropriate to the situation. The key words here are "mutual," "open," "honest" and "appropriate." Communication must be mutual, or it is only a single-dimension monologue. The interaction between two or more needs to be open and honest for it to be trustworthy and valuable to all participants. As a township supervisor stated recently, "If people can't be open and honest with me, we haven't anything to go on with." The sharing of ideas or feelings in a communication must be appropriate to the situation or rela-

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<sup>2</sup>Refer to Appendix A, page 23, "The Crowded Office."

tionship. Generally, people feel more comfortable and safe sharing their feelings and ideas in close personal relationships than they do in a professional setting. You may feel that wisdom or discretion dictates caution in revealing particular feelings or reactions in public communications, but the feelings that you do express should be open and honest. Discretion and/or necessary caution do not equate with dishonesty or manipulation of others.

The listener's perception of the apparent sincerity and appropriateness of the speaker's behavior is all-important in determining the listener's response. If the non-verbal cues do not match the words, the listener generally believes those cues rather than the words themselves. To illustrate: A local resident goes to his/her township treasurer, stating that there is a tax problem that he/she would like to discuss. The treasurer says, "Fine! I'll be glad to discuss it with you." But as the resident presents the problem, the treasurer continually checks the clock, taps fingers on the table, looks out the window and generally conveys an impression of boredom or impatience. Would the resident believe the original response to the request for help, which indicated interest, patience and willingness or the non-verbal, contradictory signals? Clearly, what we say and how we act must be in accord for us to be credible to others. Listening involves much more than simply "being there" with another person. Effective, skilled listeners have worked at becoming adept. There is probably no role where skilled listening is more valuable to success than that of the elected official. The value and necessity of a public official's ability to give thoughtful attention and to interpret what he/she hears with reasonable accuracy cannot be overemphasized.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Refer to Appendix B, page 25, "The Citizen Complaint."



A final area of communication important to good public meetings and within boards involves "wrapping up" the meeting with final summarization. This is important for two reasons: the first is to make very sure that members and/or the public recall the highlights and decisions that have evolved through the discussion; the second is to ensure that everyone leaves the discussion or meeting with a clear sense of accomplishment. Otherwise, the final impression may be of the heated or divisive discussions that might have gone on, rather than the decisions made as a result of those discussions. It is psychologically necessary to send people away from the meeting with a positive sense of accomplishment.

Final summarization is ideally the responsibility of the leader. It involves a concise restating of the major points discussed throughout the meeting and any final decisions made. The chairperson can precede the summary by such phrases as, "As I recall, these are the main points we covered tonight . . . ." Or, "Let's see if I remember our final decisions . . . ." The summarizer can refer to the secretary or clerk who has been taking notes to check the validity of the summary. It is helpful to all to conclude the summary with a question to the group, such as, "Is that the way you heard it?" Or, "Did I miss anything that should be included?" This gives an opportunity for final clarification and any changes that may need to be made. It is also helpful to the secretary, who will be finalizing the official records.

Sometimes members may realize that, for whatever reason, their chairperson is not going to do a summary, although one seems needed. In that case, any member has the right to ask the chairperson to summarize or to offer a summary him/herself. It is important, both fac-

tually and psychologically, that positive results of each meeting be summarized, either by the leader or by an assertive member.<sup>4</sup>

### III. Working with Troublesome Personalities

If the public official encountered only people who were considerate, amenable, courteous and kind, more people might run for office! Unfortunately, not everyone fits that description. Though each of us may be difficult with others at times, the "troublesome personality" is one who is habitually hard to deal with. To all with whom he/she comes in contact, this person is "hard to get along with" or "argumentative" or "dominating" or "always complaining." Learning some methods of dealing with troublesome people can make the public official's job more rewarding and less frustrating.

Some often seen types of troublesome people are:

- **The Bullies.** These people use extremely dominating behavior to overwhelm others. If this doesn't work, they throw childlike temper tantrums. They are prone to yelling, fist clenching and swearing at the slightest provocation. These aggressive people believe that "might is right."
- **The Complainers.** They gripe and object constantly but rarely try to correct the situation to which they object. They may either feel unable to change conditions or be unwilling to take the responsibility. Negatively passive and/or martyr personalities may be complainers.
- **The Silent Ones.** These folks never let you in on their feelings or thoughts. You don't know if they heard

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<sup>4</sup>Refer to Appendix C, page 27, "Communication Skills Ranking," for further assessment of your communications skills.

you or if they agree or disagree. They tend to use monosyllables whenever possible, such as “yep,” “no,” “umm” and various grunts. They may be either martyrs or passive types, but you will seldom be sure of which, because they won’t let you find out.

- **The Wet Blankets.** They have “been there,” no matter what subject is brought up, and they know that “it won’t work,” no matter what suggestion is proposed. These are gloomy people who effectively diminish everyone’s enthusiasm. They use the past and its lessons, which only they remember, to control the present and predict the future. They usually are martyrs who manipulate by negativism.
- **The Experts.** These are “superior” people who let you know how fortunate you are to have their vast knowledge and experience available to the board. They are condescending, “tolerant,” patronizing and pompous. They make others feel inadequate when they can. They tend to be arrogantly aggressive people.

When you must interact with troublesome personalities, there are three possible courses of action you may take. One is to accept their behavior, no matter what the cost to you or to others. A second is to try to change them, though we can really change only ourselves. The third option is to learn effective means of coping with them. Coping means using certain actions or behaviors that equalize the balance in a situation. Successful coping aids in minimizing the effect of the behavior or actions of the troublesome person. People who impose unfairly on others through a difficult personality may or may not realize what they are doing, but they control others through their unpleasant actions. Too often, people around them allow them to control,

to everyone's disadvantage, by not developing coping skills that can equalize the power balance.

The following actions will help you to learn to cope with the troublesome personalities described above.

### ***The Bullies:***

- Give them a little time to run down before you attempt to respond.
- Don't worry about being polite: get in the conversation as soon as they do begin to run down.
- Get their attention: by calling their name firmly or changing position (sitting if they will, or standing, deliberately).
- Maintain eye contact to show that you are not intimidated.
- Use assertive behaviors to state your views.
- Avoid getting into an argument—win or lose, you actually lose: you lose credibility and you risk losing the chance to communicate.
- Be ready to use humor and friendliness.
- Develop and maintain meeting ground rules that limit speaking time.

### ***The Complainers:***

- Use positive listening skills even if you feel Complainers don't warrant it; they may need your attention.
- Restate their complaints in your terms and see if they agree with your understanding of them.

- Don't agree with or apologize for their allegations, even if you accept them as true.
- Avoid becoming defensive with them.
- Try to state and acknowledge all facts related to the complaint.
- Use a problem-solving approach:
  - Ask specific, informational questions.
  - Assign limited fact-finding tasks, where appropriate.
  - Ask for complaints in writing, and assure the writer you will actually consider them in further interactions.
- If all above fails, ask the Complainer, "How do you want this discussion (meeting) to end?" and wait for an answer.

### ***The Silent Ones:***

- Ask open-ended questions that invite opinion.
- Wait for a response calmly and with complete attention. Don't fill in the silence!
- If the person doesn't respond, comment on what is happening between you. End your comment with an open-ended question, such as, "Where would you like us to go from here?" Or, "How do you feel we can proceed?"
- Repeat waiting, then commenting, then asking. (Stay calm!)
  - If he/she opens up, be attentive. Encourage with good listening and reinforcing body language. Limit your own conversation.

- If he/she remains silent, end the interaction. Don't be overly friendly. If appropriate, set up another meeting and/or tell the Silent One what you will do, concerning the subject/decision at hand, since a discussion has not occurred.

### ***The Wet Blankets:***

- Be aware that Wet Blankets may drag you, or the group, into negativism.
- Avoid trying to argue Wet Blankets out of their pessimism.
- When past failures or negative experiences are brought up, counter them cheerfully with examples of success, wherever possible.
- When solutions or decisions are offered, raise possible negative results yourself, so that you control the responses.
- Counter the effect on the group that the Wet Blankets may have by turning to clear and positive thinkers with equal experience. Ask them to evaluate the possibilities of the Wet Blankets' fears being realized.

### ***The Experts:***

- Be certain you are extremely well prepared with facts that have been carefully checked for accuracy.
- Avoid accepting or rebutting with dogmatic statements. When met with them, question their validity on a factual rather than emotional basis.
- Use questions, not countering statements, to raise problems.

- Repeat step 3, if the Experts continue to bulldoze with “expert” opinions.
- When you can do it honestly, show appreciation and respect for the Experts’ knowledge. Remember, these people may also need attention!
- Propose delays in action, if necessary, to gain time for other individuals, or for the group as a whole to develop information that will refute the Expert or simply get power back in the hands of the group.<sup>5</sup>

Some basic steps can be used with any troublesome personality as part of the coping process:

- Assess the situation as objectively and rationally as possible.
- Stop wasting time in wishing the troublesome person didn’t act as he/she does.
- Put some distance—both mentally and physically, when possible—between you and the difficult person.
- Develop a plan for coping that will equalize power or minimize acceptance of troublesome behavior.
- Use your plan—stick to it and don’t give in to your own negative impulses of anger or frustration.
- Change or modify your coping plan where necessary, but don’t abandon it!
- Continue to expect reasonable and appropriate behavior from the difficult personalities.
- Try to show basic respect for these persons, even though you may not respect their particular style of behavior.
- Keep your sense of humor!

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<sup>5</sup>Refer to Appendix D, page 29, “Coping with Troublesome Personalities.”

#### **IV. Effective Uses of Committees**

The basic purpose of committees, whether authorized by state law or created by the authority of local governments, is to share the work and responsibilities in a group among many people. This sharing relieves the leader of extra burdens and gets members involved in goal-fulfilling activities of the group. Wise committee delegation by leaders frequently results in improved commitment to the whole group. Members who have little if any role beyond passive response in the general meeting may not see the group's goals as their own. Committee involvement brings them closer to the goals, needs and problems of the total board.

In form, committees can be of two types: long-term and formal, called standing, or short-term and informal, called ad hoc. Effective organizations generally see value in maintaining a few standing committees. Examples might be the financial committee, policies and procedures committee and perhaps a program committee that oversees particular services. The standing committees handle affairs that are a continuing part of the structure and business of the organization. They may exist throughout the duration of the organization itself.

Ad hoc committees are appointed on an as needed basis to deal with specific assignments and business that is not routine to the group. When such committees finish their assignment, they are dissolved by the leader.

Roles on standing committees can be good training for future leaders. It is the history of such roles, however, that membership sometimes becomes a "bargaining chip" awarded to friends of the leader, or to members of the power clique around the leader, with little regard for the worth of the recipients. Power in



a group sometimes rests with the chairpersons of standing committees more than the elected leader. Obviously, this can have negative effects on the progress of the total group. When standing committees are used appropriately, however, their work is of significant benefit to the local board.

Ad hoc committee membership may not provide the status conveyed by membership on a standing committee, but the ad hoc committee is as important. Standing committees may be governed by a tradition of doing things in particular and established ways. But because the ad hoc committee is assigned a specific task and has a definite cut-off time, it is relatively free to do its business as it sees fit.

Different types of personalities will be attracted to particular types of committee work. Even without the power brokering that may occur with standing committees, their very stability and longevity appeal to the more traditional members, as well as to the less secure, who are reinforced by the same elements of tradition and stability. Membership on standing committees can provide a means for them to develop confidence as group members.

Creative, risk-taking members may find it more challenging to serve on short-term ad hoc committees, with their specific term and task orientation and greater freedom of approach. Thus, committees allow each extreme of personality to find a way to serve the organization. The leader who knows the personalities in the group well enough to make committee assignments with this information in mind will reap the maximum benefits from his/her committees.

Certain criteria need to be observed when developing committees so that they work most effectively for the board or council. How can committees be used to work well?

- Review current committees:
  - Redefine their purposes.
  - Decide if you need all of them.
  - Change status from standing to ad hoc, or vice versa if this is appropriate.
  - Determine if they have too many/too few members (keep them to a workable minimum).
- Make sure all members know:
  - What their assignment is.
  - Limits of their authority.
  - Expected reporting time on specific issues/tasks.
  - Some idea of the time commitment expected of them.
- Think ahead to possible new committees.
  - Develop goals for them.
  - Carefully choose members, bearing in mind the skills, time commitment and mutual compatibility needed for success.
  - Determine and make clear a time frame to complete the task or to report back to the board or the chairperson.<sup>6</sup>

The wise leader will choose the committee chairperson very carefully. Committees can "make or break," depending on the skills and personality of the chairperson. Those members with well developed interaction skills, commitment to the organization and the respect of their peers will tend to make the best chairpersons.

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<sup>6</sup>Refer to Appendix E, page 33, "Committee Self-evaluation."

With careful attention to developing the committees, including wise selection of members and chairpersons, the committee system can be an invaluable tool for the local board.

## **V. Conducting the Meeting**

Each of us can recall attending meetings that were great disappointments because of the way they were conducted or what they accomplished. Yet those who conducted the meetings surely had every intention of having an effective session. Public meetings can fail for many reasons, but failure is often due to a lack of understanding of the need for thoughtful planning. The leaders involved are often so caught up in the demands of the moment that they fail to realize that some basic issues in setting up the meetings need attention. These issues revolve around "task" and "people" considerations.

Task considerations include:

- Arranging the meeting site.

Local boards and councils may have little choice in site, as they meet in traditional locations. However, they can make efforts to ensure:

- That meetings are held at the best time for most of the people to attend.
- That the physical setting is prepared with lighting, seating, heating and/or cooling as comfortable as possible.
- Preparing the agenda. (Agendas should always be available prior to board meetings.)
  - They should be kept simple and clear.

- Input should be sought from both members and officers.
- Conducting the meeting:
  - Start on time!
  - Ensure that everyone understands each issue and the reason it is on the agenda.
  - Establish ground rules that allow citizen input as well as board discussions, but limit discussion/input time.
  - Stick to the agenda except in emergencies.
  - Keep the process moving along.
  - End in a reasonable time (two hours is reasonable).

Surprisingly, many local boards do not use an agenda at their regular meetings. The agenda is a helpful tool for leaders, members and citizens alike. It serves as a guide and also as a control, when necessary. With an agenda, everyone present clearly knows what will be covered. This informs and provides a sense of progression of events that helps ensure an orderly meeting. If a board member or a citizen attempts to disrupt a meeting by introducing an inappropriate topic, the leader can easily disallow it because it was not on the agenda.

Though the agenda is necessary to a well run meeting, it must always be used as a guide, not a club. If someone shows good reason why a deviation from the agenda should occur on occasion, the leader, with the members' permission, should be flexible and allow this change. Otherwise, the moment may be lost for an important issue. Inflexibility in the face of demonstrated need does not serve the best interests

of the group and may indicate negative controlling by the leader.

These instances of deviation from the agenda do not happen often but need to be met openly when a legitimate but unexpected issue is presented. Generally, the agenda helps everyone. It should, however, be kept to a reasonable length. It is better to call another meeting to complete all the business at hand than to tackle too much for the attendees to handle in one sitting. A meeting that lasts over two hours soon loses the attention of its audience.

It is appropriate to structure public meetings agendas in the following manner<sup>7</sup>:

- Call to order (on time).
- Roll call.
- Minutes.
- Brief public comment.
- Reports of officers.
- Standing committees reports.
- Special or ad hoc committee reports.
- Unfinished business.
- Postponed business.
- New business.
- Extended public comment.
- Adjourn (on time).

This order of business can be adjusted to fit the par-

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<sup>7</sup>Refer to Extension Bulletin E-294, "The Meeting Will Come to Order," available through your county Cooperative Extension Service office or the MSU Bulletin Office. (Price: 50¢, for sale only.)

ticular needs of a public board or council, but it should remain reasonably constant for all meetings once those changes are made.

The discussion above relates to “task” items. Those who develop meetings also need to be aware of “people” issues in the meeting. The level of skill in interpersonal relations demonstrated by the leader of a public meeting is crucial. It will exert great influence on the character of the meeting and the satisfaction of those who attend. The information on communication in the first section of this bulletin applies very directly to the “people” issues in the meeting. In addition, leaders need to be sensitive to the following points:

- Devise methods to control the long talkers (establishing a five-minute time limitation is a help).
- Draw out the silent, understanding that silence may indicate either shyness/insecurity or hostility/resentment. (It is important to sense which of these is occurring so you know how to deal with that person.)
- Protect the weak in the group—the new, young, old, “different.”
- Encourage the clash of ideas.
- Discourage the clash of personalities.
- Be able to handle negative people and those with personal “axes to grind” or hidden agendas.
- Close on a note of achievement.

With planning, with a simple agenda that is used effectively and with attention to the interaction needs of the people involved, meetings can be effective, productive and satisfying to everyone.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Refer to Appendix F, page 35, “Test Yourself.”

## **VI. Summary**

With honest commitment and a willingness to accept and learn from the differences among people, the local governmental board can be an enjoyable setting in which to accomplish meaningful goals. With the use of empathy and good communication skills in an atmosphere of mutual respect, board members can gain maximum benefits from their tenure. A team spirit, which is so essential to boards, comes about when all members are willing to listen openly, express their ideas, object without being objectionable and learn from each other. Effective board members reinforce one another, rather than being destructive or unfairly critical. Individuals on boards that accomplish their objectives constructively know that their personal goals will be accomplished through the process of helping the group to accomplish its goals. An effective board, in the long run, is one in which each member puts the success of the group above his/her personal need for success.

## **For Further Readings in This Area**

Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. *Management of Organizational Behavior*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Michael Doyle and David Strauss. *How To Make Meetings Work*. Playboy Press.

R.S. Lazarus. *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process*. McGraw-Hill.

D. Watson and R. Thorp. *Self-Directed Behavior: Self-Modification for Personal Adjustment*. Brooks/Cole Publishers.

G. Corey. *I Never Knew I Had a Chance*. Brooks/Cole Publishers.

Robinson and Clifford. *Team Skills in Community Groups*. University of Illinois Press.

*Planning the Program and Managing the Meeting. Volume I—Handbook of Guidelines for Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Group Meetings*. College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University.

*Guiding Group Discussion and Parliamentary Procedure for Common Use. Volume II—Handbook of Guidelines for Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Group Meetings*. College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University.

*Jobs of Members, Officers and Committees. Volume III—Handbook of Guidelines for Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Group Meetings*. College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University.

Robert Bramson. *Coping with Difficult People...in Business and in Life*. New York: Ballantine Books.



# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### THE CROWDED OFFICE

#### Case Study

Mary and Jim work for the planning commission and have shared an office for several years. They have worked out an arrangement of space, office procedures and personal courtesies that is satisfactory to both. Recently, their boss put a new employee, Kim, in their office. Kim has a desk, chair, visitor's chair and two filing cabinets, as do the others. Although Mary and Jim often were kidded by fellow employees about having a really spacious office, larger than anyone else's, they are very upset at having their comfortable arrangement interrupted. Kim is feeling the extent of their indignation from the hostile attitude the others are showing. They carefully move around Kim's furniture as though they could barely avoid hitting their shins, have coffee together in one corner and exclude Kim, forget to share office memos, and lately have been making pointed remarks that indicate real resentment of the interloper. Other people are noticing their problem and are gossiping about it.

Kim does not know how to respond to the other two, feels very unhappy at having been placed in this office, and dreads going to work each day.

**Directions:**

Review the information on communication and think about the following questions:

1. How are Mary and Jim using the following aspects of communication in a negative way? Be specific.  
Voice—words, tone, attitude, mood.  
Body—gestures, eye contact, expressions.
2. How could they turn negative communication around so as to include Kim?
3. How can Kim use positive communication skills to improve this situation? Be specific.
4. Have you ever been excluded as Kim is? How did you handle it?

## THE CITIZEN COMPLAINT

### Case Study

Since moving to his present location, Dick and his family have spent many hours fixing up the old house on the site, which he had purchased very cheaply. Now it is finished, it looks great and they are very proud of their work. They didn't have much to spend, but with the family effort they now have a comfortable home.

Yesterday, however, Dick had a real shock. The new tax assessment came and was double last year's bill. Dick is really angry about this and is going to the township supervisor to protest. He feels they simply cannot afford to pay such a bill. He is also angry because he feels there is no incentive for self-improvement efforts if one is going to be penalized this way!

Dick feels he must make the supervisor see the unfairness of this assessment. He intends to confront him using his forceful personality. He doesn't care if the supervisor knows he is good and angry, and he expects the supervisor to lower this unfair bill!

Glen has been a supervisor for 20 years in the township in which he grew up. He knows everybody from all the old families and rarely has any problems with them. They understand each other. His problems come with people that move in from other places and don't understand how things work, like the fellow Dick, who is coming in today. He sounded really upset on the phone, but Glen will try to joke him out of his anger. Usually that works with people who give him problems.

If he can't joke them out of their anger, sometimes he has to remind them that most of the tax laws and decisions come down from the state anyway. It's really not his fault if citizens don't like them! Generally, he is able to get rid of the worst problem situations using these behaviors.

Think about this case:

1. Do you feel the communication between Dick and Glen will be successful? Why? Why not?
2. List specific positive communication behaviors Dick could use to handle his problem more effectively.
3. What positive communication behaviors would you recommend Glen use?
4. What do you predict as an outcome, both in<sup>2</sup> facts and in the feelings of both people?

## COMMUNICATION SKILLS RANKING

### Instructions:

The following list contains 15 communication skills that can help you carry on effective interactions every day. Read through the list, thinking about your skills. Reread and rank yourself, 1 through 15, with 1 indicating your best skill or trait.

Think of the significance of your ranking:

- Does it indicate that you are an effective communicator?
- Could you benefit by improving particular skills?
- Are you willing to risk new behaviors in attempting to improve those skills?

\_\_\_ Confident

\_\_\_ Flexible

\_\_\_ Good listener

\_\_\_ Open to input from others

\_\_\_ Sensitive to your own needs and to others'

\_\_\_ Sense of humor

\_\_\_ Empathetic (able to understand another's views, attitudes, etc.)

\_\_\_ Giver and receiver of clear messages, both verbal and non-verbal

\_\_\_ Diplomatic or tactful

- \_\_\_ Perceptive—you “sense” people accurately
- \_\_\_ Caring and able to show it
- \_\_\_ High threat level—it takes a lot to bring out defensive attitudes
- \_\_\_ Responsible for self and others
- \_\_\_ Honest
- \_\_\_ Expressive in words and actions

## COPING WITH TROUBLESOME PERSONALITIES

Using the coping tips given on pages 7-12, determine how you would cope with the following situations that occur frequently in the public setting. Think specifically of what you would do and say to cope.

- A. Bill Jones is a large man who uses his size to intimidate others. (His friends call him "Bill the Bull.") He has learned that size and a loud voice get him what he wants much of the time. Last week he came storming into the monthly meeting of the city council demanding to be heard immediately. The presiding officer attempted to inform him that he was out of order, but Bill just blustered on about a grievance he had against the street department. The officer backed down and Bill proceeded to exhort the council for 30 minutes, completely frustrating and angering the rest of the council and destroying the atmosphere of the meeting.

Outline behaviors that the council's presiding officer could have used to cope with Bill. Think of it as though it was your problem.

- B. The supervisor looked up to see who was coming in late to the township meeting and groaned to himself. He knew the meeting wouldn't be as pleasant as he had hoped. Joe and Harry, old friends, were sure to upset the meeting's progress. Sure enough, the next agenda item brought Joe to his feet with a complaint that Harry echoed from his seat

next to Joe. Soon they were each muttering darkly to people seated near them. The supervisor tried to ignore them, but that didn't work. He never knew how to handle them and wished he dared to kick them out. As the meeting progressed and Joe and Harry griped about almost everything, the supervisor began to lose his control. He started defending actions and decisions angrily. This caused Joe and Harry to act offended but didn't stop their complaining.

How could the supervisor have more effectively handled Joe and Harry? Be specific. Could you use coping skills to achieve better results than this leader did?

- C. Josie has been a trustee for many years. She knows enough people in the township so that she is reelected trustee year after year. She never misses a meeting but rarely joins in the discussion. Her fellow board members say behind her back "Josie sits. She sits, year in and year out. No one seems able to draw her out on her views. She watches and apparently listens but almost never comments." The other board members are never sure where she stands on an issue until the actual vote is taken. When they try to get Josie to express opinions and she does little more than mutter, they tend to try to speak for her—to fill in her sentences, which are left half-said. They interpret her scant language as they see fit, and she generally allows this. Josie frustrates everyone on the board and they simply don't know how to handle her.

How would you cope with Josie's silence and help her to become a more valuable member? What would you say and do?



## HOW WE GET INTO CONFLICT WITH OTHERS

### DEFINITIONS:

1. We agree on the goal but differ on how to get there.

Please mark the best response:

Have you experienced this situation?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

If you have, how was it solved?

- \_\_\_\_ a. By someone dominating through argument.
- \_\_\_\_ b. By someone using his/her power over the group.
- \_\_\_\_ c. By trying different ideas until one worked.
- \_\_\_\_ d. By someone persuading the others.
- \_\_\_\_ e. We never got it worked out!
- \_\_\_\_ f. Other means (please write in what happened in a sentence or two).

2. Our goals simply are far apart.

Please mark the best response:

Have you experienced this situation?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

If you have, how was it solved?

- \_\_\_\_ a. By someone dominating through argument.
- \_\_\_\_ b. By someone using his/her power over the group.

- D. You came to the board meeting full of enthusiasm, ready to share an exciting idea with the other members. You've been looking forward to this meeting ever since you thought of a good plan for handling the sewage treatment problem with which the township has been struggling. The meeting is still in its first hour and now you are really depressed! All you want to do is find a way to get Gloomy Gus off the board, or to quit yourself. You are recalling time after time that Gus has caused the same reaction in you and others on the board. He never gives approval to any ideas but his own. He always makes others feel that they are foolish or some way in the wrong. He remembers everything that failed in the past and relates these experiences to what people suggest in present situations. He just did this to your exciting idea. Everyone else on the board has been influenced by Gus, too, and they are not considering your plan.

Could you learn new ways to cope with Gus? Were you prepared ahead for his pessimism? How could you have better handled Gloomy Gus?

- E. You are a citizen attending the city council meeting and are feeling very uncomfortable. You think the mayor just made you look like a fool, but you're not really sure. When you described a problem you have in the neighborhood, the mayor seemed to listen but responded in such an overbearing way that you feel he was being condescending. He smiled nicely, but in some way it felt as if he was patting you on the head, as if to say, "There, there! You just let those of us with important things to say tell you how to handle your little problem." That isn't the kind of response you expected. The fact that he spent the next 10 minutes going on and on with an answer

- c. By trying different ideas until one worked.
- d. By someone persuading the others.
- e. We never got it worked out!
- f. Other means (please write in what happened in a sentence or two).

3. Others seemed threatening to values or customs I hold important.

Please mark the best response:

Have you experienced this situation?

Yes  No

If you have, how was it solved?

- a. By someone dominating through argument.
  - b. By someone using his/her power over the group.
  - c. By trying different ideas until one worked.
  - d. By someone persuading the others.
  - e. We never got it worked out!
  - f. Other means (please write in what happened in a sentence or two).
4. There wasn't enough of something to go around, and who should get what was the problem.

Please mark the best response:

Have you experienced this situation?

Yes  No

If you have, how was it solved?

- a. By someone dominating through argument.
- b. By someone using his/her power over the group.
- c. By trying different ideas until one worked.

that you think was inappropriate increased your discomfort. You are thinking, "He acts like he knows everything, and I don't think he really does. Nor does he care about my problem. He just cares about telling everybody how smart he is! "

Is there any way you might have turned this situation around? How could you have coped more effectively with the mayor?

## COMMITTEE SELF-EVALUATION<sup>a</sup>

Yes No

- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Is the meeting place comfortable, accessible, attractive?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Does the committee understand its assignment?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Is the agenda carefully planned and thoughtfully worked out by the whole committee?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Do members transact their business efficiently?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Does the committee represent different viewpoints? Is the focus on ideas—not personalities?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Do members feel they really are a part of the committee? Do they think of it as "their" committee?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Is the committee willing to be accountable to the parent group?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Does the committee spread its work assignments?

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<sup>a</sup>Used with permission from Daryl Heasley, et al. *Jobs of Members, Officers and Committees. Volume III of Handbook of Guidelines for Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Group Meetings.* College of Agriculture, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Can the committee make constructive use of conflict, opposition or criticism?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Is the committee flexible and adaptable?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Does the committee obtain facts, study and analyze them, make decisions as a result of full discussion, and then take appropriate action?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Do members feel that time is used wisely and have a sense of real achievement?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Do meetings begin and end on time?
- \_\_\_ \_\_\_ Totals

Good committees have "yes" answers to most or all of these points. A "no" answer indicates a point that needs improvement. How much improvement does your committee need?

## TEST YOURSELF<sup>10</sup>

Certain qualities in a chairperson promote good meetings. Here are a few for you to test yourself on.


Score 3 points for each "always," 2 for "sometimes," and 1 for "never." A good chairperson will score 20 to 30 points.

	Always 3	Sometimes 2	Never 1
Do I get all possible information to the members before the meeting?	_____	_____	_____
Have I checked arrangements for the meeting, such as heat, lighting, seating?	_____	_____	_____
Have I prepared an agenda estimating the time likely to be required for each segment?	_____	_____	_____
Do I respect the opinions of others, even though I may disagree with them?	_____	_____	_____

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Do I use discussion questions to encourage participation?	_____	_____	_____
Can I handle an argument without getting personally involved?	_____	_____	_____
Do I try to get less vocal members to participate?	_____	_____	_____
Am I aware of the importance of adequate information for a discussion?	_____	_____	_____
Do I come to a meeting prepared for a clear introduction of the subject aimed at clarifying goals and promoting informality?	_____	_____	_____
Do I listen to detect when members are in agreement on an issue or when they are getting off the subject?	_____	_____	_____
My Score	_____	_____	_____





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