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Tools Training Strategy Facilitation

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# Outrage and control

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This talk is about what it takes for councils and agencies to positively involve communities in change and decision-making when the potential for outrage is high.

## What causes outrage

Back in the 1970s US electricity utilities were trying to understand why towns and cities responded so negatively to proposals for nuclear power plants in their vicinity. They hired psychologists to figure out what was going on and what could be done about peoples' persistently hostile attitudes to nuclear power facilities.

Over the next decade or so these psychologists (Paul Slovic is probably the best known name in this group) developed a new science, Risk Perception, and a new practice, Risk Communication.

They were able to explain, for example, why a parent might happily smoke tobacco (hazardous) while driving their children through speeding traffic (hazardous) to join a furious protest against a mobile phone tower (no known to be hazardous).

In a tour de force of condensation, Slovic and his colleagues managed to distill twenty years of research into the perception of risk into just three principal factors: unfamiliarity, lack of control and perceived catastrophic potential.[1]

[1] Slovic, P., Fischhoff, B., and Lichtenstein, S. (1980) *Facts and Fears: Understanding Perceived Risk*, in Slovic, P., (ed.) (2000) *The Perception of Risk*, Earthscan, London, pp137

**Unfamiliarity.** Human beings are designed to be alert and anxious in the presence of the unfamiliar. It's how we survived for the last million years or so (until risk managers arrived anyway). Fortunately unfamiliarity is a temporary phenomenon – you can't stay unfamiliar with something forever. As an example: in 2002 in the suburb of Mission Lakes in South Australia, only 2% of residents with a "third pipe" for recycled water said they'd be willing to drink recycled water. But after using recycled water on their gardens and in their toilets for two years, the number increased to 58%.[2] That's unfamiliarity's antidote – familiarity – at work.

**Control.** This is about people feeling able to control their exposure to risky phenomena. The need for personal control is practically a biological drive. When people feel in danger they become highly motivated to get out of the way or, if they can't, then to face and defeat the danger. Battles over local developments are really contests for control of people's living spaces. People want to feel safe in their homes and neighbourhoods and there's practically no limit on how motivated they'll get when they feel those spaces are under threat. The antidote to lack of control is shared control…either by oneself, or by a trusted proxy or umpire. It's when people feel there's no independent umpire in local development conflicts that they become most outraged.

**Perceived catastrophic potential.** Since people's only knowledge is based on what they hear, in the press, and from their trusted grapevines, this factor is really about what "the buzz" says. If we *hear* from people we trust that a mobile phone tower is dangerous, then that makes it dangerous, irrespective of the objective evidence of scientists. The antidote to negative buzz is positive buzz from other trusted people with no vested interest in the development.

These three factors explain the logic behind seemingly irrational judgements about risk: why, for instance, a mobile phone tower radiation might be seen as more risky than smoking or driving: it's not under the users' control, it's unfamiliar and people say it causes cancer.

*Control* is the factor I want to focus on in this talk.

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[2] Hurlmann, A. (2008) People will drink recycled water – just keep them in the loop, *The Age* Dec 12

It may be that what predictably generates outrage is not irrationality, but an altogether more rational response to the assertion of unequal technological and institutional control over the living spaces of communities. Essentially people may be angry because they are afraid. And they may be afraid because they are not in control and they don't trust the people who are.

The White Male Effect illustrates the point.

## The White Male Effect

In seeking to explain the observation that men seem less concerned about technological hazards than women, Slovic concluded that:

> "…risk perceptions may reflect deep-seated values about technology and its impact on society. White males may perceive less risk than others because they are involved in creating, managing, controlling and benefiting from technology and other activities that may be hazardous. Women and non-white men may perceive greater risk because they tend to have less control over these activities and benefit less from them. *Indeed, risk perceptions seem to be related to individuals' power to influence decisions about the use of hazards."* [3] [my emphasis]

In advising authorities what to do to avoid outrage, the risk communicators' conclusions can be summarised in a single phrase: share control with the affected public. If the underlying cause of outrage is unequal control, then it's in our interest to act proactively to equalise that control.

## The stick points: control

Of course, sharing control with the public is hard to do for public authorities in 2008 Australia. I think there are probably two sticking points, both of which are more to do with organisational beliefs than concrete realities, and so are open to change.

Firstly, as professionals we tend to see our work as value-free problem solving, rather than as an assertion of control, and hence we may not recognise or act to defuse the outrage-causing power inequality which may be so stark to the members of the public.

Secondly, we often unconsciously filter our perceptions of risk so that risks to predictability of corporate processes assume greater prominence that political and social risks of the failure of those processes. I'll explain that point in a moment.

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[3] Slovic, P, *The Perception of Risk*, Earthscan Publications, 2000, p399-400

I'll deal with these questions one at a time.

**First, spotting and defusing control inequality**

Let's focus on seeing ourselves the way the public sees us – as holders and exercisers of control.

As professionals we tend not to think that establishing a skate board rink, rezoning a public reserve, excavating a pipeline, paving a shopping centre, or reviewing a development application are exercises in control. They look more like straight forward problem solving exercises. There's a problem and our job is to devise a workable solution.

However there are plenty of ways we are exercising control here: deciding what problems deserve attention; deciding on the processes and timetables; choosing who to consult with; deciding what solutions can be considered and which excluded; deciding what views are valid and those which aren't.

Some people say "the community is apathetic". I think this "apathy" might also be coiled up rage at being excluded from so many decisions that affect their interests. Remember that we live in an age with a very strange tension: never before in human history has the public been so highly educated and competent, and yet most have about as much control over the important decisions in our communities as medieval serfs did in theirs.

An outraged community can be a powerful antagonist. My home community is by no means an elite one, yet when it organises to oppose a development the community action committee calls upon a professor of statistics, a crown defender, the director of a PR company, the secretary of the P&C, an ex president of the local Leagues Club, and the current president of the local Surf Life Saving Club amongst others. Nowadays this prodigious technical and organising talent is coupled with the internet's extraordinary access to knowledge and communication. When a local authority outrages this community the question is not "am I right?" but "how lucky do I feel".

I recently delivered a training course for staff at a Victorian water utility. There was a young engineer who had developed a route for a sewer pipeline to a new housing estate. His chosen route lay squarely down the middle a bushland valley that was lined with parks, walks, trails and picnic areas. It was a highly built up area and I imagine this valley was a beloved local asset. Laying a sewer

main is of course a major engineering operation, displacing thousands of tonnes of soil and whatever else is in the way.

The utility's community reference panel warned him against recommending that route. The utility's directors urged a rethink. The training workshop turned into a project therapy session with his colleagues exhorting him to consider alternative options. But no. He was a smart young man, yet he saw this purely as a civil engineering problem with one inevitable solution.

Having spotted the existence of control in your situation, it's necessary to take action to defuse the potential for others' perception of your own control to derail the project. This inevitably necessitates *sharing a degree of control* over the project and its process.

Nowadays we are spoilt for choice about deliberative methods of involving members of a community in shared decision-making. From one-off planning forums and community advisory committees, to more elaborate methods like citizen juries and consensus conferences. There's plenty of literature on these methods. The Victorian, NSW, Queensland and Western Australia have published detailed guides for doing this sort of work.

> *Victoria: The Effective Engagement Kit*, from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria
> www.dse.vic.gov.au/dse/wcmn203.nsf/childdocs/-77F54463EE8D06B3CA257036001508E7-A5E28FFDBEF43DD6CA25707C0014FA62?open
>
> *NSW: Community Engagement in the NSW Planning System*
> 203.147.162.100/pia/engagement/intro/print.htm
>
> *Queensland: Get Involved* community engagement guides, from the Queensland Government
> www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/engagement/guides/index.html
>
> Western Australia: *Consulting Citizens, A Resource Guide*
> www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/documents/guidecolour.pdf; and
> www.citizenscape.wa.gov.au/index.cfm?event=ccuPublications

Good practice does not mean relinquishing final decision-making power to a community. And it does not mean that every decision requires high levels of community engagement. It does, however, mean working closely with communities (as well as the usual technical experts), to provide authoritative input into decisions where serious matters are at stake.

As a facilitator I can tell you there is an extraordinary power in genuinely sharing decisions with members of a community: they are transformed by the offer of genuine responsibility. This is the principle of "people respect what they create".

**Second, expanding the definition of risk**

The second sticking point concerns risk management.

Sharing control with the public is seen as risky by many technically trained professionals. A lot of planners and engineers just don't trust the public. What if there are crazy people or "take over merchants"? What if there is conflict? What if people get angry? What if I lose control?

Yet there is another side of risk management. There are risks in not capturing the extraordinary knowledge of real people who've lived their lives in real places. There are the risks of people feeling alienated by not being involved in decisions that affect their places (like lack of care, vandalism and social breakdown). And there are the "how lucky do you feel" risks of a community getting really angry with you.

I have to declare an interest. I'm an advocate for "high participation" methods of community engagement, like planning forums, facilitated committees, citizen juries, consensus conferences and so on. These methods are not appropriate for the every government decision, but for important decisions they give community the control it craves and give government the assurance the final decision matches community expectations and needs and is enriched by the wealth of local knowledge located in the community.

I think these methods make government more capable and give participants the enlivening experience of acting as citizens rather than consumers.

More importantly, these methods are a chance for government to make better decisions. They invite real people with real values and perspectives into the rational space of decision making. These lay people inevitably challenge the technical assumptions and priorities of decision-makers and so force planners and managers to think harder, be self-critical and justify their views more cogently.

There has been an explosion of interest in "high participation" methods of community engagement in Australia. Many agencies are using such methods to manage their social, environmental and

political risks more effectively. Here are a few examples where control over final decisions was effectively shared with the public:

• Kevin Poynton, the CEO of Mindarie Regional Council in Perth apologies publicly after resident opposition derails a proposal for a huge waste treatment facility. He establishes an independent Community Engagement Advisory Group with four 'generalist' community reps, four local residents reps – including critics - and an independent chair. They develop a Community Partnership Agreement that sets the terms future contractors must adhere to. The project is now proceeding.

• Kiama Council on the south coast of NSW is gridlocked by seemingly intractable community conflict over limits on subdivision of rich pastoral lands surrounding the town. The council runs a Citizens Jury. It unanimously recommends measures to protect rural land. This gives council the confidence it needs to proceed with the preferred thrust of the new Local Environment Plan (LEP).

• Warringah Council on Sydney's northern beaches deals with intractable community conflict over a proposed new LEP by establishing a committee entirely consisting of residents group reps – including those critical of the proposal – and gives them a facilitator and two planners to develop the new LEP themselves. This radical place-based LEP is gazetted 2 years later and proves highly defensible in the Land and Environment Court.

A final point: use experienced facilitators to do this work. Facilitators are professionals who are comfortable with working with groups of people. They enjoy uncertainty, strong personalities and conflict. The best way to manage your risk is to use a professional facilitator, not just to front the process, but to help you design it.

In summary:

- Be aware of the potentially corrosive role of unequal power;

- Respond with honesty, respectful sharing of control, and flexibility;

- Remember that a well designed, respectful community engagement process is a superior form of corporate risk management;

- DIY is not recommended: engage a specialist. Work with an experienced facilitator to design and run the engagement process.

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For information on Community Engagement training see Les's website: www.enablingchange.com.au, or email Les on les@enablingchange.com.au