

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

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I have one goal that I use to remind me what my job as a resource manager is all about. That goal is:

"TO IDENTIFY, SELECT, AND IMPLEMENT MANAGEMENT DECISIONS THAT SHOW RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP, AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY"

In this goal the term "resource stewardship" means making sound biological decisions that consider the long term viability of the resource. "Agency responsiveness and accountability" recognize that those of us in this business have customers and are accountable to the society that we serve. All too often, even the best decisions are not implemented because of a negative reaction from one or more of our publics. Public involvement is one way to better insure that good decisions are made and implemented.

Public involvement can be defined as:

"A STRUCTURED WAY TO DEFINE INTERESTS AND ALTERNATIVES, INVOLVE PEOPLE AND SHOW AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MAJOR MANAGEMENT DECISIONS"

There are two primary reasons why public involvement is important and why it won't go away. First, there has been an explosion in the number of groups with an interest in almost any management decision. We can no longer speak about a public or a silent majority. Instead, our publics are diverse in their range of interests, desire to participate and in their sophistication.

Second, many of our publics are skeptical about expertise of any type. The maxim I like to use is, "For every Ph.D. and study there is an equal and opposite Ph.D. or study". At the same time natural resource managers are

faced with demands for greater biological and political accountability for their decisions.

Public involvement has become a fixture on the landscape of natural resources management throughout North America. In some places its called the technique and legal mandates require it for many decisions. In other places, it is more appropriately viewed as one more tool in the manager's arsenal. Like all tools, there are situations in which public involvement is useful and situations in which it is not appropriate. Also, the degrees of appropriate involvement vary among different interest groups and vary with the issue or decision under consideration.

Deciding when involvement is appropriate, who should be involved, and how they should be involved can be a major challenge all by itself. Fortunately, there are a few general concepts to help managers determine who should be involved and how they should be involved. One concept that many practitioners have found useful involves answering these four simple questions in turn:

1. Who, among all of our publics, should be involved?
2. What do we want from them? (support, votes, help, a specific change in behavior, money, approval, etc.)
3. How should they be involved?
4. If they are involved, what do we need to share or exchange with them?

The answers to the second and fourth questions are relatively straight forward tactical decisions. The first and third questions, "Who do we involve, and how do we involve them?", are more challenging. There are no pat answers to either question. Rather, the answers depend on the issue or problem that your management program faces and the degree of interest that various public have in the issue.

People usually want to be involved in anything in which they have an interest or stake. Levels of interest vary all the way from radical action to complete disinterest and so do levels of involvement. People are stakeholders because:

1. they have a real or perceived interest in the resource, its use (e.g. hunters), non-use (e.g. anti-hunters), or users (e.g. the tourism community).
2. the decision impacts them directly.
3. their location, that is they are close to where the decision is implemented.
4. they have an interest in the process used to make the decision (i.e. government watch-dog groups who insure that the decision process follows the letter of the law)
5. they pay for the decision directly (as license buyers) or indirectly through general taxes.
6. they are in a position of power or authority and can review the decision.

Not every stakeholder needs to be equally involved. Just as the list of stakeholders may vary with the issue or management decision at hand, their degree of involvement also varies. There are 5 different levels of involvement including:

- A. No involvement
- B. General information
- C. Public relations
- D. Education efforts
- E. Actual participation

General information involves some talking and almost no listening. Basically the approach is to provide information without looking for any feedback. Routine news releases and general information brochures often fall into this category of involvement.

Despite its negative connotations, public relations are a part of our business. Annual reports that proudly tell the public what we did for them during the past year are one public relations tool. So is the after dinner speech to the local sports club. Most often these efforts are focused at getting a message

across to our publics.

Education efforts require that we do both listening and talking. We share ideas and information and, in the process, attempt to shape attitudes and influence behavior. Hunter safety education is a good example.

Like education, actual public participation is a two-way street where we expect and may even solicit feedback. Usually, it works better if we provide a structured way for stakeholders to become involved. If we don't provide a structured mechanism for involvement, some stakeholders will find their own way to get involved. The level of participation varies with how interested the stakeholder group is in the particular issue or problem. In general, there are four degrees of actual participation.

1. Reaction to a draft proposal.

For many management decisions, participation is limited to asking for a stakeholder's reaction to a draft proposal. This can serve two purposes. First, it can detect hidden "bombs" in the proposal. Second, it can open the door to further involvement for groups that have a particularly keen interest in the decision. Many public involvement specialists contact stakeholders with the general statement like "your reaction to this proposal may cause us to change the draft slightly".

2. Active involvement in revising a draft proposal.

Often, we can identify a stakeholder with a deep interest. These are the stakeholders who will demand to be involved but need a starting point. In these instances, it is appropriate to contact them as soon as a first draft is prepared and to use that draft as a starting point for a dialog. This is best done early, before the agency has an entrenched position. Often the contact begins with statements like "We have a first draft that we're not too happy with and we'd like you to help us make it better." This practice is time consuming, but it opens the door to outside ideas and new

options, and it can build the necessary support that leads to successful implementation.

3. Active involvement in defining options and writing a first draft.

On rare occasions, the issue is so complicated and politically divisive that even the process of writing a draft proposal will incite and alienate some stakeholders. Usually, these are bio-political issues in which there are going to be some winners and some losers. In these cases it is best to involve stakeholders on both sides of the issue. Once written, the draft can then be circulated to other stakeholders for review, comment, and reactions.

4. Actual decision or approval authority.

Ministers, agency directors, commissions, boards, legislatures, premiers and governors are a few of the stakeholders who occasionally like to reserve the right to make a decision. A well planned and documented public involvement effort is one of the best ways to insure that the management decisions you propose are approved once they get to this level. On rare occasions, even these folks don't feel comfortable in making a decision. Instead, they pass the issue on to a public referendum as happened with the moose referendum in Maine.

Throughout the 1990's, natural resource managers can expect to face complex issues that fall into the realm of bio-politics. Natural resource agencies and managers can expect stakeholders to challenge major bio-political decisions that are made without their involvement. Consequently, public involvement will become an increasingly important tool for developing options and implementing decisions.