

Public Affairs Handbook

PART V: GRASSROOTS

Chapter by Patrick Jackson

Confrontation, Activists: Tactics & Instruction

I. PREPARING YOURSELF & YOUR ORGANIZATION MENTALLY

To deal with other peoples' attitudes, we must first examine our own.

This is the great Commandment in handling confrontation. Criticism & change are the elements of confrontation -- and both draw forth deeply seated attitudes from all participants. If we assume our views are automatically "right" and in everyone's interest, while those of others are wrong and exhibit ulterior motives, this attitude will reveal us as ^{self-}righteous & unbending -- a guarantee of confrontations which are nasty, emotion-wrought . . . and dangerous.

The reason they are dangerous arises from a second guideline: controversy is the great public university.

We often issue information -- via annual reports, media statements, etc. -- that offers real insight into the organization. How few people pay attention. Ask

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your neighbor if he's heard about it and most times he'll answer no. But when the company is engaged in a controversy, everyone suddenly gets interested. This is basic human nature. A good example can be found in the school playground. The youngsters are gathered around a teacher who's showing them some interesting feature of nature, or a student who's telling about his family's vacation. Suddenly a fight breaks out in another part of the playground.

What happens? Everyone drifts over to watch. The moral is clear: you can draw a crowd to a struggle but not to a lecture.

Something else happens which is even more instructive. After watching for a minute with some degree of objectivity, onlookers begin choosing sides. The very act of controversy seems to have a gut-level pull on humans to take a stand. This is why acrimonious controversy is dangerous. We know that in any struggle some are going to go with us, others against us. As long as it's a clean, fair fight, it can be ended -- perhaps even amicably -- and onlookers are willing to reconsider their positions. Let it become one-sided or a name-calling free-for-all and positions harden. Those against us are now dead set against. They may become mortal enemies. In this era of fast changing technology, rapidly

altering politics & constantly realigning coalitions, mortal enemies are the ultimate danger.

Therefore, if we want critics & opponents to be open-minded so they can hear our ideas, we must be open-minded to hear theirs. To do so we must first identify & understand our own attitudes.

1. Issues can't be "managed," confrontation can. The seductive phrase "issues management" can be a trap, as Howard Chase & other ^{of it's} sponsors have themselves warned. Too many independent actors are involved in the drama for anyone to direct the play. But we can control our actions & responses. (Stan Sauerhaft ^{prefers} "issues response management" to point this up.) As the playground scene shows, one goal in managing confrontation is not to let it become acrimonious. If your opponents choose to be foulmouthed & engage in hyperbole, you needn't answer in kind -- or at all. A soft answer does turn away wrath, if not that of your opposition at least any which might otherwise be kindled in the public, the media & high places.

Everything said so far is obvious . . . isn't it? A review of business' response to its critics over the past two decades reveals that -- obvious or not -- we haven't

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been acting according to these guidelines.

Which suggests that America's managers are slow learners. The Japanese & others seem to be proving this by their success with quality circles & team tasking. These management techniques were developed years ago by Americans (& Englishmen). They have been taught in our colleges for over a decade as "QWL" (Quality of Work Life). Some U.S. companies have experimented deeply with them; Standard Brands & Mead Paper are examples. But -- we didn't adopt or seriously try the techniques, beyond a few experiments in 4-day week or flextime.

The same applies to most of the techniques discussed in this book. Social movement groups, consumerists, environmentalists have been using them for 25 years. Often using them against business. Yet we're only now discovering their potency.

If there's one quality the public relations/public affairs philosophy brings to business, it's the ability to look objectively at the world, including our antagonists & critics (and friends, who often do more damage than good). This will help to spot useful techniques when they first prove themselves, and add them quickly to our strategies.

In short, public affairs can help us become fast

- B. Leave the decision to opponents when . . .
 - a) the threat you may strike back with all the money & power at your command is a strong negotiating weapon;
 - b) the opposition group is weak or underfunded (if you force the confrontation it will gain them allies, money & underdog status);
 - c) you're prepared but want them to be seen as the aggressor.

- C. Seek or allow confrontation when it will . . .
 - a) place important issues on the public agenda;
 - b) attract attention to subjects the public's been ignoring, in spite of your best efforts to get them interested (a hospital strike over ridiculous wage demands was not resisted by management in order to help the public face up to healthcare costs);
 - c) divert attention from other problems or issues, internal or external; or provide a scapegoat;
 - d) reveal opponents or their line of argument as shallow, unfair, self-seeking or similarly unattractive.

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Luxurious as it would be to vent our feelings about "those bastards," this is too high-priced for anyone's budget. Bottom-line thinking insists that we discipline our public relationships. So do Amy Vanderbilt (written incidentally by a public relations consultant); the principles of our democratic system; and the business tenets of pragmatism & objectivity. If you, personally, & your organization are not attitudinally in tune with these axioms, avoid all possible controversies. You will be clobbered.

II. KNOW YOUR OPPOSITION

3. Classic Activist Strategies. Much can be learned from the annals of contemporary activism, which began in the Fifties with the pacifists and their opposition to nuclear weaponry. Pacifists are the most enduring of social protesters, and probably know more about public affairs than anyone. They're just as active today as they were at the turn of the century or at mid-century. For a liberal education, read the histories of organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Women Strike for Peace, the War Resisters League, American Friends Service Committee and others.

Their tactics are a catalog of activism: 1) When they were unable to interest news media in their point of view (remember, the U.S. had an extremely closed, Establishment press in the Fifties), they staged irresistible media events. When they began climbing the fence at the New London submarine base or lying down in front of supply

trucks, suddenly they captured reporters' attention.

2) Despite the fact almost everyone wants peace, pacifists are well aware few are willing to work for it. Coalition-building therefore gets high priority. The Quakers, Mennonites & traditional peace churches learned how to touch strains among Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Jews and many others. Traditional peace organizations like those mentioned above drew in persons interested in civil rights, civil liberties & other issues. 3) Since confrontation was inevitable in an era when McCarthyites saw communists behind even ^{civ}military uniforms, pacifists quickly reaffirmed their non-violence. It is, after all, natural to them. But it gains respect -- especially when force is used against them & they become underdogs.

Basically, there are two types of activism. One works for social change -- civil liberties, peace, better nutrition, etc. Such movements generally spring from the well-educated, middle- or upper-class and are at base philosophical & intellectual. Levels of commitment may be high & emotional -- but are basically non-experiential. Contrast- ed with this is activism which arises from protest against intolerable conditions -- rent control, slum housing, worker mistreatment. Such movements often attract middle-and upper-

class persons as a matter of social justice but are usually led either by the sufferers themselves or a professional community organizer. Most community organizers are well educated but, missionary-like, devote their lives to non-material values.

4. What Are They Apt To Do? Since activists today range from good citizens on both the right & the left working within the system, to anarchists willing to do most anything, infinite variations are possible. Most activist tactics still fall into one of these categories:

- a) Informational activities. News releases, of course, but activists learned long ago that personal visits and interviews work best with both print & broadcast personnel. Such contacts are less apt to result in roundup stories or reportage in which those holding other views are called for balance. Colorful, concerned activist leaders make such good copy reporters are willing to give them feature treatment, and make "revelations" of their plans.
- b) Symbolic activities. Flagpole-sitting, mock funerals or trials, street theater and picketing in

costume are effective ways to demonstrate not only where a group stands but how strongly it feels. Boycotting is a more potent event, which can inflict real damage on the target while also symbolizing the group's belief that punishment must be inflicted. Secondary boycotts & off-site picketing can be very effective by putting pressure on the target organization from uninvolved companies or agencies.

- c) Organizing activities. Leafletting door-to-door and in shopping centers is less an informational technique than an organizing one. When true believers are discovered, they can immediately be enlisted. Networking thru churches or unions is impossible to stop. Housemeetings, which are called by committed persons to share information with neighbors, have become a sophisticated means for singling out probable recruits while holding the meeting itself to an objective tone.
- d) Legalistic activities. Petitions, lawsuits, filing legislation, testimony at hearings, prodding regulatory & administrative agencies -- any activist worth mentioning is expert at all of these today.

Such acts provide immediate access to media because they are legitimate news.

- e) Civil disobedience. Sit-ins, blocking traffic, climbing or cutting thru fences, trespassing, symbolically destroying records are some of the tactics. Younger activists feel these actions should be legally condoned as free speech. Traditional Quaker peace protesters, as a contrasting example, used to leave home with their toothbrushes knowing the price of their effort was at least a night or two in jail.

III. ACTING AS CONFRONTATION MANAGER

5. Find your vulnerabilities -- & change those you can. Sociology tells us that changes in the relationship between two groups are the result of an abuse by one. As public relations practitioners know, this may be a perceived abuse if not a legitimate one. Constructing an abuse list is a tool for determining vulnerable positions. For each of your publics, ask what actions the company could take, or is taking, that might be seen as abusive. This will "red flag" policies & activities that lead to confrontation, allowing time to reconsider -- or attempting to prepare the affected publics for what is to occur.

Conflicts involving specific issues can normally be debated and resolved amicably within the confines of the system -- based on the facts. Pollution, community relations & similar localized issues become confrontations in two cases: when the company's attitudes put down its critics, or when an established activist group comes to the

scene acting on stereotyped expectations of how the company will handle itself. Such confrontations can be managed by removing the causes beforehand. The facts have little to do with managing these cases.

For both types the vulnerabilities can be ranked something like this: a) treating critics as enemies (when most often they're customers, sometimes employees or shareholders); b) rigidly refusing to compromise; c) refusing to listen to or meet with those who hold opposing viewpoints; d) ridiculing them or their ideas.

To avoid confrontation with established activist groups, know their expectations beforehand -- and simply don't fulfill them. They may expect company spokespersons to be tied up in statistics or legalities. Let them emphasize concern for people instead. If your activists expect -- and no doubt publicize the fact -- that you won't meet with them, destroy their credibility by doing so, in the most comfortable, friendly surroundings you can find. A major vulnerability on their side is acting on stereotypes of business. Exploit that by showing them (and the public) a humanistic, caring organization and you will be managing confrontation in the best way -- by removing its causes.

There are, however, many confrontational topics that

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simply cannot be controlled. They are global in nature -- but of course critics will kick the villain they can reach. As long as half the world goes to bed hungry every night, questions over right sharing of resources will exist. Until safe storage is found for radioactive & hazardous wastes, people will be fearful. Until some method other than jobs is devised to distribute the wealth, workers & their families will rail against unemployment, work rules & robots and in favor of labor-intensive policies. How we reply to these critics depends on individual cases. But it's clear we'd better have predetermined strategies -- another essential in managing confrontation.

6. Choosing a strategy. There are at least 3 steps in the selection process. First, place the issue which underlies the confrontation into the framework of the 4 phases of public perception. Is this issue (a) latent, (b) emerging, (c) current or hot, or (d) corollary or fallout. Existence of confrontation does not mean the issue is automatically in phase (c). Confrontation occurs in all phases, because it is a powerful awareness tool for activists. Ralph Nader took a latent issue, shoddy car manufacturing, & brought it to hot status in a few months by a carefully planned confrontation. How you respond may differ greatly for an emerging issue, which you may not wish to see promoted by engaging in confrontation; or a fallout issue, unresolved from a previous confrontation.

Second, identify your opposition on a profile scale, like these by Philip Lesly and Alan Marsh:

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	STRATEGY
ADVOCATES	Propose something they believe in, e.g. equal pay for equal work.	Reason
DISSIDENTS	Against something, or many things, because it's their character to be sour on things as they are.	Logic and selected emotions
ACTIVISTS	Want to get something done or changed: "Don't just stand in the picket line -- do something."	Logic and strategic actions
ZEALOTS	<p>Overriding singlemindedness, absorbed with one issue such as stopping power plant. Egocentric, must run the show, consider moderates to be enemies.</p> <p>--Philip Lesly in Managing the Human Climate newsletter, May-June 1978</p>	<p>Leave them alone: create climate of understanding among public, which isolates zealots & may wither their zeal.</p>

TYPES	POLITICAL ACTION REPERTORY	% of POPULATION
INACTIVES	Do no more than glance at political news; might sign a petition if asked.	12.3
CONFORMISTS	Progressively involved in business of good government, attending meetings, treating with officials, even campaigning for candidates. But will not participate at all in protest.	17.5
REFORMISTS	Besides sharing same level of involvement in conventional politics as conformists, they engage in "moderate" levels of protest (lawful demonstrations & boycotts).	36.0
ACTIVISTS	Complete political all-rounders; their action repertory is the widest, and among their numbers are people having the highest levels of conventional & unconventional tendencies.	14.4
PROTESTERS	Choice of political action is confined to protest methods; entirely shun any conventional involvement.	19.8
--Alan Marsh in <u>Futures</u> , April 1979		

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Third, draft a screenplay, a theatrical dramatization of the action as it might unfold. Who are the knights in armor? Who the dragon, who the fair maiden? Will the public see your confrontation as comedy or tragedy? Will it be good box office? Remember: to the public your confrontational crisis is theater.

When these judgments are made, you can more confidently decide whether to avoid confrontation, seek it or leave the decision to your opponents (the "Boy Scout" strategy: Be Prepared but help old ladies across the street).

IV. TACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CONFRONTATION

7. An integrated crisis management system will help avoid ad hoc decisions under fire -- which often turn into disasters. Here's one geared to controlling the confrontation:

A. Stick to the issue at hand, unemotionally & pragmatically. Don't drag in irrelevant items like personalities, inferred ulterior motives, history. Don't be dragged into discussing them by the opposition.

B. Be able to admit you're wrong, or could be. Whether it's an error of fact, a misstatement, discommunication, or an action that worked out differently than planned, admitting it is a major way to build a credibility. Big people admit to their goofs. And since to err is human, it puts you in the shoes of the public -- and vice versa.

C. Don't be afraid to alter your position. Rigidity comes across as the belief you couldn't possibly be wrong, so unless your case is 100% air tight, and 200% believable, alter it as discussion proceeds -- ~~and~~ when it will help. This shows you are capable of compromise.

D. Find good things to say about others & their viewpoints, including your opponents -- and say 'em. Honestly, of course, not contrivedly. Admitting the strengths of other views makes your catalog of their weaknesses credible. It demonstrates your desire to find the best solutions, regardless of who may have put them forth.

E. Present your views forthrightly & do not apologize for your self-interest. All sides in the controversy are, after all, acting on personal motivation. Business loses when it allows unspoken self-interest to become an issue, because citizen groups & governmental bodies raise the spectre and claim to be watching out for the public. Derail this tactic by stating openly what your interests are and the reasons behind them. The honest (not contrived) argument that "we need this in order to make a

profit" (or whatever) has more power than businessmen think.

Beyond such a frame of reference -- against which all acts or statements should be tested -- there are no answers, only options. Here are some guidelines which have been thoroughly tested and may work for you:

- a) beware of opinion polls, no matter how statistically unimpeachable. Unless the public is going to vote on your issue, the key measure is intensity of feeling, not numbers. A few true believers can tie you in knots for years. Proof: only 15% of Americans oppose abortion or gun control, both now and for the past decade, yet look what Right-to-Life & National Rifle Ass'n have been able to accomplish for their minority positions.

- b) don't use superior financial or other resources flagrantly. Onassis put up a war chest of \$1 million to locate a refinery where a citizens' group felt it shouldn't go. They had zero budget. But their blotchy mimeographed handouts bespoke sincerity, the refinery backers' 4-color foldouts looked like slick hype. The Mobil ads have apparently served

a necessary cheerleading purpose within the industry, but they have built great sympathy for the company's opponents. Handled another way, the internal objective might be obtained without stiffening the opposition.

- c) the last thing to consider is calling in the authorities. If activists are passing out leaflets to your workers, do not charge them with trespass. That makes you appear the bully, will win sympathy for them, probably bring in the ACLU to argue for their First Amendment rights. You look reactive, unwilling to listen or engage in dialogue, hardened in your position. If dangerous symbolic acts are attempted, your best position is to show concern for the safety of those involved. If someone becomes a flagpole sitter, immediately express your concern about an accident. Point out how unnecessary it all is since you are willing to discuss legitimate criticism anytime. (You are, aren't you?) *
- d) avoid the victory syndrome and seek an I win/you win outcome. If only you win, others have to lose -- which means they're sharpening their knives
- * Hire a cherry picker to take up coffee & soup; you'll get the publicity & sympathy, he'll look like a nut.

for another opportunity to attack. Dropping military metaphors & language altogether will probably help. Consider Edward L. Bernays' definition of a public relations professional: "A societal technician with the skills to bring about accommodations in the court of public opinion." Perhaps the reentry of the Chinese onto the world scene will help us learn from these masters the art of letting others save face.

e) ideologues are seldom effective for long. Temporary coalitions are fine, if they achieve the goal. Your allies may be opponents tomorrow. The alternative is groupthink . . . and no one has been able to document progress from that. Similarly, momentary majorities may appear -- to your aid or detriment. Ride with 'em, knowing you may have to take another route when they evaporate.

Finally, here's some advice from veterans:

- * Don't counterattack the source, do counterattack the misinformation -- and use the occurrence as an opportunity for getting your case across. (Irving Rimer, American Cancer Society)

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- * Avoid escalation. Avoid polarization. Seek accommodation.
(John Paluszek, public affairs counselor)

- * Be sure you know what's already a matter of public record about your organization. Otherwise, you may be surprised by activists' accusations. (Nan Kilkeary, Allstate Insurance)

- * Use mass media, especially tv, for low involvement publics which don't need the information. This forces them to become aware & process the data. To reach involved publics, use specialized, targeted media. (James Grunig, University of Maryland)

- * Don't just oppose. Never ridicule. Rise above the opposition. Explain without being contentious or daring a skeptical public to prove you wrong or knock a chip off your shoulder.
(James H. Foster, Brouillard Communications)

A last word. Don't damn the activists. You are one.