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Unlocking Local Knowledge to Benefit Public Acceptance Work

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Public acceptance work is usually conceived as a separate exercise from the daily operations of a firm. This is why the wealth of knowledge in the existing relations between staff, suppliers, clients, subcontractors and local players is rarely exploited. When the potential of this latent knowledge is considered, one at once sees the benefits (no need to start from scratch, the discretion of informal channels, the low cost), but also the difficulties (the number of people involved, the practicalities, the sensitivity of the subject).

This paper describes how this latent knowledge can be unlocked to benefit public acceptance work.

First, we need to clarify public acceptance. Those of you who have practical experience of contentious projects know that before, during and after intensive public acceptance work, some stakeholders will always oppose regardless. The real task of any communication is not to convince people who are against, because even if they are listening, they are not hearing your messages. The real task of any communication is to rally potential allies and followers among a majority of passives. My contention is that insiders (people from the company or with strong relationships with the company) are better placed to achieve that goal than the communications department alone is.

Insiders have a wealth of knowledge on stakeholders that is usually untapped. In a nuclear project, I recall the case of technicians monitoring over 50 wells in a farming area with few allies. On most large projects, consultants meet business leaders and officials prior to writing a report on the economic consequences of the project. Similarly, environment consultants meet environmental groups, associations and officials before submitting their report on the environmental impact of the project. Let us not forget the obvious: the staffs and contractors who live in the area and have their own network of family, friends and acquaintances.

The PR department and the corporate communications department have constraints that severely restrict their ability to maximise support for a contentious project. Sheer numbers dictate that they can only meet few stakeholders, and so they invariably end up having a network consisting of the same representatives. Invariably, the network lacks depth. It hides more than it reveals, because it does not cover the true territory.

Realising this, the PR and communications departments engage into road shows, exhibitions, public meetings and mass communication campaigns. Because of who they are, people expect them to sell and they do. And because of the necessities of group dynamics, the messages cannot be tailored to specific individuals. Interactions do take place, but people leave with little feedback, and certainly without being mobilised. In

fact, on very sensitive issues, those information efforts are unfortunately not rewarded. Instead of diminishing tensions, they increase them.

Fortunately, there are examples of successful public acceptance work. Every manager working on a contentious project knows that outside a formal setting, when individuals meet as individuals and not for the project, some people will show interest and express their support, often for reasons that no one contemplated. They will suggest improvements, and more significantly offer their services without any prompting. The mobilisation tools that elude us in our work appear magically when we least expect it.

The simple truth is that like in any selling process, public acceptance comes from within. A sale is achieved because a buyer wants to buy, not because a seller wants to sell. The actions, however humble, of local players behind the scenes, ripple and gain a territory in ways that are inaccessible to formal communication tools. If those informal contacts could be multiplied and co-ordinated, the PR department would have a real lever for effective public acceptance work. Insiders possess the keys for multiplying those informal contacts.

The keys required are information on potential allies and events. Communication is not so much selling an image or a package, as adapting a project and a company to the needs of allies in order to help them to act (e.g. it is better to help a local union describe in its own terms its position regarding a project than for the company to produce a flashy brochure congratulating itself about the union's support). Since no single ally can cover a territory and no single action is sufficient to gain public acceptance, it is important to monitor and follow a process that multiplies the number of allies and their actions covering the entire territory bit by bit.

Creating events rarely has the credibility that existing events have. When a member of staff who is retiring talks warmly of a project to his colleagues ("I wish I could stay to see it through") this has more impact than any literature, memo, notice board announcements or management meetings could possibly have. Similarly, when a third party expresses positive views on the project at a meeting unconnected to the company behind the project, the message has added credibility.

The issue thus is to mobilise insiders to help the PR department to uncover allies and events. Most insiders who are interested (the majority will not be) will contribute, if only they are told that public acceptance work is not a specialist formula that can magically convert opponents, that it requires more informality, more listening, more reach than the communications department alone can handle.

In a lot of cases, this added contribution will make their own work more fulfilling. The technician having coffee with a local inhabitant will realise the impact he can have if he relays information to the company. Suppliers may offer an introduction to some key local players. The process to transmit information from the insiders to the company is not a burden but a positive process as long as this is a win/win relationship of mutual exchange.

Insiders should have access to the database of events and to the list of players. This has three immediate benefits: it reinforces the message that there is nothing to hide, allows insiders to feed information on new events and new players only (a great time saver), and clearly shows the progress of public acceptance work.