

## Exception Proves the Rule

by David Bidwell

The school cafeteria felt smaller than a phone booth and hotter than a sauna. Each of the 225 chairs was filled with angry citizens waving neon signs above their heads. As an engineer droned through barely legible slides, a steady stream of stakeholders continued to fill in every available space around the perimeter of the room. When people began to plop on the floor at the foot of the stage, I could feel the blood rising to my face. Stepping around a toy dog dangled by a man dressed as a horse with a large "dog and pony show" sign, a local policeman approached me and whispered in my ear that the capacity of the room had been exceeded. I would have to move the 400 people to the gymnasium next door where the boy's basketball team was practicing. That was about the fifth time that day that I thought about the rule.


Just 2 days earlier, a colleague and friend called to ask if I could facilitate what promised to be an onerous public meeting. His client, a federal agency, realized it would need help running the meeting, but my friend was already booked. I explained to him that our company has one really big rule: never accept last minute facilitation. However, I told him that I would see what I could do.

Our rule against such drive-by facilitation is based on our belief that public participation entails much more than holding a public meeting and taking comments. Our approach is to carefully usher our clients through a series of steps. We help them understand the potential of public participation and establish consistent expectations throughout their organization. Then, we meet with stakeholders to assess the history of the issues and identify community concerns. Based on what we learn, we work with the client to set realistic goals and choose public participation tools that are appropriate to the context. Perhaps most importantly, we coach clients on how to run a transparent, credible participation process and build meaningful relationships with stakeholders. We know this. We live this. We never break the rule.

We said yes. He was a good friend and he was in need. We could forget the rule this once. How bad could it be?

Immediately, I urged postponement of the meeting, using all the best arguments. The client would not budge. A project schedule had been established and the meeting had been announced. Things quickly got worse. The client was tacking a public meeting for a hotly disputed issue onto the end of a routine technical update. I scrambled to contact key stakeholders, but time was too tight to develop a repartee with them or convince the agency's project team of what I had heard. The team that planned the meeting had assorted visions of what would be accomplished and how to approach the public. Clearly, everyone in the organization was not on the same page, and none of them were even in the same book as me. I managed to brief one manager on what I had learned from the public. He promptly decided to stay home. The day before the meeting, the agency sent a letter to elected officials announcing that they were in fact not flexible on the issues of most concern to the community. The newspaper reported it the same day. This all happened before 400 angry stakeholders showed up at a room that could only accommodate half that amount.

Accompanied by strong grumbling, we were able to move the meeting next door. Several hours of irate sign waving and intense ramblings ensued. Every attempt to salvage a productive meeting was thwarted by skepticism and anger. More than once, the client and I were drowned out by jeers of "Let the public speak." The public did speak, but nobody was listening on any side. Finally, the citizens began to trickle out of the gymnasium. Undaunted, I tried to talk with some stakeholders as they left. The kindest words I heard were from a man who conceded that I might be a nice guy, but I was surely a terrible facilitator. One woman who looked just like my grandmother stared at me as I approached and said, "Just walk away." The dog and pony guy just barked.



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The public solidified their view that the agency was disingenuous. The client confirmed its suspicion that the public was irrational and bitter. I retreated to a fitful sleep at a local hotel. This was not public participation. This would never help our client or the stakeholders ever learn the value of real public participation. The exception proved the rule. It's a good rule.

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