# Dealing with Emotional Audiences

www.ca-ilg.org/EmotionalAudiences

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**Question:** *We have a controversial development proposal coming up for decision and we are expecting a difficult public hearing. In particular, we are expecting many of those who are opposed to the development to be quite emotional about what they perceive as negative effects of the development. There are of course countervailing positive effects.*

*As decision-makers, what can we do to keep the tone of the hearing civil and focused on the merits (and demerits) of the proposal?*

**Answer:** There are a number of strategies that leaders can employ to maximize the likelihood that public meetings will involve constructive exchanges that contribute to the best decision being made. These strategies are most successful, however, as sustained, long-term efforts to meaningfully engaging a wide spectrum of the community in the decision-making process. As such, they involve acting on certain values as leaders and decision-makers. This relationship to values is the connection between ethics and leadership.

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> The Institute's Meeting Resource Center aims to help local officials and agency staff make the most of meeting time.
>
> www.ca-ilg.org/meeting-resource-center

## Understanding the Sources of Public Emotion

You indicate that the people at the hearing are likely to be "emotional" about the proposal. In your own desired to be calm and civil in your own responses to what might occur at the hearing, it can be helpful to understand *why* people get emotional in situations like you describe.

In their book, *Dealing with an Angry Public*, Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field note that people can get emotional—angry—in three situations:

1. When people have been hurt;

2. When people feel threatened by risks not of their making; and

3. When they believe their fundamental beliefs are being challenged.

They note that anger can be intensified when people feel:

- Weak or powerless in the face of others who have power;

- Treated unfairly, disrespectfully or dishonestly; or

- Anger is a helpful way of rallying the troops, demonstrating one's own power, or bullying others into accepting their point of view.

They note that while understanding discrete sources of anger can be helpful, most situations involve a combination of causes.[1]

It sounds like the people concerned about the proposed development could be feeling threatened by the risks they perceive the development poses to them. Perhaps they are worried that the development will hurt their property values or other qualities of their neighborhood that they like. There may be public health and safety concerns.

Of course, as decision-makers, you have power to ultimately decide what happens with the proposal. Moreover, there may be the perception that the project proponent has political clout and extensive resources with which to pursue approval of a project. Members of the community they may be worried decision-makers don't care about their concerns and won't take their interests into account in making a decision.

Compounding their frustration and anxiety may be the fact that concerned residents may not understand the decision-making process or how to be effective advocates of their interests. They may feel showing their anger is the only way to underscore the depth of their concerns and get decision-makers' attention. They may also not have all the information that would be helpful to them in understanding both the downsides and the upsides of a particular project.[2]

## Leading by Values

With power comes responsibilities that are linked to core values. As mentioned previously in this column, research by the Institute for Global Ethics indicates that humans all share common core values irrespective of religious faith, culture or nationality. These include the values of trustworthiness, fairness, responsibility, compassion, respect and loyalty.[3]

For example, a central *responsibility* for public officials is to make decisions that are in the community's interests. This is the essence of leadership in a representative democracy. It may not always be clear what course of action is in a community's best interests; reasonable people can earnestly disagree.

Moreover, with net benefits can also come costs. Another hallmark of values-based leadership is working to assure that certain neighborhoods don't bear *unfair* burdens associated with achieving those community-wide benefits. If those burdens are not avoidable, then a leader looks for ways that those burdens can be counterbalanced with corresponding benefits to those neighborhoods.

Another important responsibility for public decision-makers is stewardship of the decision-making process. This involves making sure that the process is *fair* and that all points of view are treated with *respect*. Another responsibility is making sure that participants in the process have *trustworthy* information about the impacts—both positive and negative—about a proposal. And of course, leaders themselves need to be trustworthy. This, among other things, means telling the truth, acknowledging mistakes and being guided by what serves the community's interests—not leaders' personal or political interests.

## The Public Is Skeptical, If Not Downright Distrustful

The unfortunate reality is that polling data is replete with examples of the public thinking that government is generally controlled by a few big interests looking out for themselves[4] and skepticism about whether one can trust government to do what's right. Fortunately, the public tends to have more faith in local government,[5] but the general lack of trust in government means that it doesn't take much for residents to question whose interests are being served in a given situation. The media and bloggers frequently stand ready to encourage that kind of thinking.

Campaign finance and financial interest disclosure requirements enable the media and public to know whether the project proponent has engaged in efforts to curry favor with decision-makers. Disqualification requirements help protect the public's trust by requiring decision-makers to step aside from the decision-making process if they or those with whom they have a financial relationship could be financially affected by approval or rejection of the project. Open meeting and fair process laws also assure the public that decisions have not been made in advance of public meetings, with the concomitant expectation that public officials will hear and consider the public's views in making their decision on a matter.

These laws create minimum standards for protecting the public's trust and confidence in the integrity of the decision-making process; public officials can and do set their sights higher than these minimum requirements. From a public trust and confidence standpoint, it is necessary but not sufficient to faithfully comply with these transparency and disqualification requirements.

## A Leadership Strategy

Assuming that there aren't conflict of interest or other issues that might cause the public to question the underlying motivation for decisions, the next question is how to build trust in the decision-making process in general. Susskind and Field recommend a strategy that focuses on building and maintaining a *long-term* relationship of trust between your agency and the community it serves.

This involves, among other things, being willing to 1) share information, 2) listen to people's concerns and 3) learn what steps might be taken to address those concerns.[6]

✓ **Sharing Information:** This means that the agency and the project proponent must share all information—the good, bad and the ugly. If indeed the project will or could have negative effects, whitewashing that fact will not help build trust in the long run since the agency is likely to be in for a big "we told you so" when those negative effects start occurring after the project is in place. Moreover, after the project is approved, the project proponent is not likely to have the same if any incentives to address those effects.

The agency also should share information about how the decision-making process will work, so concerned residents know how to participate effectively. This also underscores that the public agency is genuinely interested in their concerns.

✓ **Listening:** Acknowledging concerns is very important. It demonstrates that the agency and its leaders care about its residents and are willing to explore solutions to the problems that the project may create. Active listening means reiterating what has been heard to make sure 1) those sharing their concerns understand that their message is being heard, and 2) those receiving the information understand accurately the concerns that are being expressed. Then, as Susskind and Henry note, following up with questions to probe underlying assumptions and concerns is critical.[7] The goal is to get to the root of the concerns ("We understand that you want us to turn this project down; what specific impacts are you concerned about and how will these impacts affect you and your neighbors?").

This may mean decision-makers will have to work hard to listen past the expressions of anger and fear that might occur, especially if these expressions are less than civil.

✓ **Learning.** Once core concerns have been identified, the process of addressing those concerns can begin. Leaders can ask the project proponent and concerned residents what steps might minimize the impacts that are of concern. Leaders can share their own ideas and seek reactions or refinements.

A challenge is that traditional public hearing formats tend to be ill-suited to this kind of dialogue. This is why public agencies are well-advised to encourage project proponents to meet with concerned residents in advance of public hearings.

Skilled public agency staff can play and important role in making sure these meetings are bona fide exchanges of information as opposed to merely a one-way sales pitch. Encouraging staff to help the public frame their questions and get answers can help concerned residents feel that the public agency does indeed care about their concerns. Letting staff know that you appreciate their efforts to independently apply the agency's standards and get answers for questions that decision-makers and the public are likely to have can also pay big dividends in making sure decision-makers themselves have full information on which to exercise their judgment.

Smart project proponents also understand that it's in their long-term interest to share, listen and learn as well. This includes offering commitments to minimize knowable impacts and offer benefits that may counterbalance impacts that cannot be minimized or

avoided. For those impacts that are feared but may not occur, the project proponent may be able to offer commitments to address those impacts if indeed they do occur. Interestingly, Susskind and Field's book is just as much addressed to the private sector as it is to the public sector.

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**The Mutual Gains Approach to Resolving Disputes**

In *Dealing with an Angry Public*, Susskind and Field advocate what they call the "mutual gains" approach to dealing with an angry public. This involves using processes that adhere to six key principles.

1.  Acknowledge the concerns of the other side

2.  Encourage joint fact finding

3.  Offer contingent commitments to minimize impacts if they do occur; promise to compensate knowable but unintended impacts

4.  Accept responsibility, admit mistakes and share power

5.  Act in a trustworthy fashion at all times

6.  Focus on building long-term relationships[8]

The authors explain each of these principles and illustrate them in their book (by examples of where these principles have worked and examples of where pursuing the opposite approach led to sometimes disastrous results).

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# Bottom Line: No Magic Wands

It may or may not be possible to address residents' concerns about the proposed project. There are limits to what a local agency can legally require a project proponent to do and it may be that the current standards of the community need to be updated to reflect the community's concerns about a given type or project. If so, that's something leaders need to be forthright about and the task becomes one of figuring out a better set of standards and processes for the future.

Ultimately, it will be the frequently difficult task of decision-makers to decide whether the project makes sense for the community under current circumstances. If decision-makers decide it does, there still may be people who disagree and are disappointed (and yes, angry) with that decision. If decision-makers decide the project does not make sense, then there are likely to be members of the community that are disappointed (and again, possibly angry) with that decision as well.

As leaders and decision-makers, your collective goal is to have as many people possible feel heard and that their input made a difference. Another goal is for the project proponent and opponents alike to feel that the process was fair and their leaders behaved in a trustworthy manner.

As writer Lewis Lapham noted, "Leadership consists not in degrees of technique but in traits of character; it requires moral rather than athletic or intellectual effort, and it imposes on both leader and follower alike the burdens of self-restraint."

You can't control others' behavior, but you can determine the traits of character you bring to your own role in the decision-making process. You can also encourage your agency to apply values and character traits to the decision-making process. Although it requires work, the potential payoff is a long-term relationship of trust and confidence with the community that will likely pay big dividends in terms of the agency's efforts to address the difficult issues of the time.

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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# References and Resources

*Note: Sections in the California Code are accessible at http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/. Fair Political Practices Commission regulations are accessible at www.fppc.ca.gov/index.php?id=52. A source for case law information is www.findlaw.com/cacases/ (requires registration). (kj)*

[1] Lawrence Susskind and Patrick Field, *Dealing with an Angry Public: The Mutual Gains Approach to Resolving Disputes,* (The Free Press: 1996) at 16-17.

[2] *Id.* at 28.

[3] Rushworth Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living* (Fireside: 1995) at 13-49.

[4] *See* August 2008 Public Policy Institute of California (finding 67% percent of respondents believe that the state is run by a few big interests as opposed to 24 percent believing that government is run for the benefit of all the people), available at http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_808MBS.pdf (see question 23). *See also* **Council for Excellence in Government poll** conducted in mid 1999 (giving special interests top billing in answer to what's wrong with government today), available at www.pollingreport.com/institut.htm.

[5] In a September 2008 Gallup poll, 72 percent of respondents said that they have either a great deal or fair amount of trust in local government. *See* www.gallup.com/video/110461/Americans-Trust-Local-Govt-Much-More-Than-National.aspx.

[6] *Angry Public*, at 229-231.

[7] Id. at 231.

[8] *Id* at 37-38.