Career Compass 15: Dealing with Angry Crowds

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Public outreach comes with the territory in this profession, even if your only contact is at a business meeting open to the public. To truly be successful you must enter the realm of community-owned processes, and be prepared to listen, listen, and listen some more.

Recently our team conducted a neighborhood meeting to discuss a tentative redevelopment project, to be undertaken by a proven developer. It was a terrible experience! It was an angry crowd and they were in no mood to listen to anyone. People shouted down the developer and staff, and they had no appreciation for any data or professional judgments. It was a disaster and something I don't want to experience again. Do you any tips on how to deal with emotional, angry crowds and survive the encounter?

This is not an unusual situation and I can understand why you're gun-shy. Oftentimes, the local government agency must help the community confront gang violence, the need to close a branch library and reallocate resources, an affordable housing project, a day worker problem, or a proposal to expand a revenue-generating business which abuts a residential neighborhood. These issues are complex, messy, emotion-laden and divisive. But they must be addressed if the community is to move forward.

So, how do local government leaders at all levels plan for and address a difficult and conflict-ridden issue which often leads to angry crowds? First, staff must understand why people get emotional. As mentioned in the Institute of Local Government publication Getting the Most Out of Public Hearings, people get emotional when they feel that they may be hurt (e.g., their homes or businesses will be taken by eminent domain), or their quality of life is threatened (e.g., a project will lead to significant traffic congestion), or their fundamental

beliefs are being challenged (e.g., a local government prohibits a Scout group from using a public facility because it discriminates against gay Scout leaders). Anger intensifies when people feel they are. . .

- Weak or powerless in the face of power (e.g., developer or influential business)
- Treated unfairly, disrespectfully or dishonestly (e.g., city staff does not respond to their concerns)

Understanding that a group is upset for a rational reason is a good start to dealing with the situation. Your understanding of why people are upset may help you craft a set of responses to minimize their anger and get them involved in the problem-solving.

Second, I can suggest a number of measures to take before, during and after the meeting with a potentially emotional crowd.

BEFORE THE MEETING

Before the encounter, staff needs to reach out to neighborhood groups, businesses in the area, PTAs, and other potential stakeholders. Go beyond the usual groups and conduct outreach to youth, different ethnic groups, and all congregations in the area. It may be best to find a staff person or a community volunteer who already has some relationship with the group and have that person make the initial contact and perhaps bring along one of the team members.

After identifying the problem that the local government is trying to address (e.g., the blighted shopping center), listen to what people have to say, acknowledge any concerns and fears, thank them for their interest, and invite them to the meeting. Make sure that the meeting is not the first time that people hear about the specifics of the proposal. You want to provide information before someone else characterizes (or mis-characterizes) the effort. Most importantly, you want to develop a relationship and hopefully rapport before trying to involve people in solving problems or working with you.

In terms of preparation, you obviously need to do your homework before the meeting. Not only study up on all facets of the project but ensure you are aware of possible concerns and fears. Outreach and listening are part of your homework.

Regarding the type and location of the meeting, you want to avoid at all costs a formal public hearing in front of a commission or governing board. The public hearing is the worst mechanism ever devised for engaging people and solving problems. The public hearing should be the culminating point confirming understandings and consensus and the problem-solving that has already occurred. You are better served by organizing a community meeting hosted by a neutral party (e.g., a church in the neighborhood) or better yet a series of family room dialogues where someone invites city staff to present tentative program ideas in their family rooms to invited neighbors.

DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING THE MEETING

In designing the meeting, you should develop a structure that allows the team to pose the problem or challenge, present some ideas (not final plans), generate lots of feedback and lets people know how you're going to follow up on their issues. The structure of the meeting is important. At the meeting, I would suggest the following:

- Personally welcome people as they arrive and introduce yourself.
- Remove any tables, dais or podium that separate meeting leaders from participants.
- Arrange the room to encourage participation—use round tables, a circle of chairs or a U-shaped arrangement of chairs.
- Consider use of community volunteers as neutral conveners and "community connectors" who invite people to the meeting and help present the problem statement and initial ideas.
- Identify the purpose of the meeting and what the city team hopes to accomplish with everyone's help.
- Discuss the structure of the meeting but be open if people want a more flexible agenda.
- Avoid technical language! Therefore, don't use an expert in redevelopment but rather someone who uses lay language in describing the general idea or proposal.
- Demonstrate an openness to all perspectives and concerns by acknowledging what people are saying and recording the feedback or issues on flip charts or other means.
- Show you care about the issues that people raise (don't be dismissive).
- Listen, respond, listen some more. This is a "healing" three-step sequence when dealing with angry crowds (or any other type of group). Again, listen; acknowledge a concern or issues (never say that a person is wrong!); respond with some information or data; and listen some more.
- Be careful with humor. Oftentimes in a tense meeting, we try to use humor. If people are angry, they will not want to hear attempted humor and it may be taken as trivializing their concern.
- Use visuals such as photos of existing conditions, sketches, project elevations and site plans.
- Use open-ended questions and interactive exercises to generate ideas, hopes, dreams, and concerns. For instance, instead of providing presentations and asking for feedback, ask meeting participants to sketch ideas on index cards which are presented and clustered around themes.
- Communicate the "whole truth" about any project, including any potential downsides (if you don't present some possible problems, someone else will and you will be perceived as an advocate.
- Present options whenever possible—people want to consider choices not one set-in-stone proposal.
- Break up the big meeting into smaller discussions, giving people an opportunity to meet face-to-face in small groups with team members and ask questions and give feedback.

- Invite people to contact members of the team to further discuss the proposal or talk about issues that are not central to the discussion.
- Create a written record of comments.
- Discuss the follow-up to the meeting and opportunities to be engaged as the effort unfolds (ensure that these are authentic opportunities and not just for show).

AFTER THE MEETING
- After the meeting, your team must obviously ensure that the follow-up steps occur. Specifically, your team should:
- Distribute an accurate summary of the proposal and all issues and concerns that were raised at the meeting.
- Ensure that the summary is distributed widely, not just to those who attended the meeting.
- Follow up personally with key stakeholders group representatives and "influentials" (those who are highly regarded).
- Make yourself available to people who want to meet with you about their concerns.
- Figure out some ways of engaging neighborhood groups and other stakeholders in addressing some of the issues raised (e.g., conduct some working group meetings on traffic or parking).
- Schedule another meeting to present ideas for enhancing the original proposal, ways of addressing the concerns raised at the first meeting, and generating additional feedback. Ensure that people who participated in the working groups present the new ideas or solutions, not local government staff.

The key to the community meeting is not to "sell" your proposal to the community but rather gather information, learn about concerns, and continue engaging people. It is about learning, not educating. Moreover, the community meeting cannot be seen as a one-time occurrence. Rather, residents and businesspeople must perceive that community meetings are part of a comprehensive way to engage people in solving problems as partners with local government. Community engagement is indeed a messy process but a critical part of our local government work and service.

Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's JOB newsletter and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.