

# Calming the Storm

*Prepare for and respond to challenging individuals / groups at public meetings*

*Dave Bartholomay*

*Minnesota Office of Collaboration & Dispute Resolution*

Our goal today: learn how to better prepare for and manage tough public meetings. These are meetings where

- members of the public are loudly voicing their concerns about the issue and may seem disrespectful \*
- the atmosphere isn't conducive to 'getting the business done' \*

*\* And we'll talk a bit about why that behavior can sometimes be expected.*

# First, a Poll Question

When you think about a public meeting with a challenging audience, would you say that ...

\_\_\_ You knew it was coming

\_\_\_ You were surprised

# Why Are People So Disruptive At Public Meetings

- Lack of trust in public institutions and leaders
- A belief that they and their viewpoint are not being seriously considered
- A sense that this is the only way for them to get attention, to impact the outcome
- They are confused, misinformed or belligerent
- Poor handling of the meeting by leaders *may make things worse*

# What is NOT community engagement?

- A single meeting
- A one-way conversation
- Asking for input on a decision that has already been made
- Something done only when it is legally required

# Why engage your community?

- More civil discussions and decision-making
- Faster project implementation with less need to revisit again
- More trust – in each other and in local government
- Higher rates of community participation and leadership development

# Why engage your community?

- Better identification of the public's values, ideas and recommendations
- More informed residents – about issues and about local agencies
- Improved local agency decision-making and actions, with better impacts and outcomes
- More community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness

# #1 What is the Purpose of the meeting?

## Public participation goal

### Inform

To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.

### Consult

To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

### Involve

To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.

### Collaborate

To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

### Empower

To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

This is a **key consideration** for every meeting

There is often confusion by attendees about what is going to happen at the meeting!

The purpose ought to be one of the **first** things talked about a meeting

## Promise to the public

We will keep you informed.

We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

We will implement what you decide.

## Example techniques

- Fact sheets
- Web sites
- Open houses

- Public comment
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Public meetings

- Workshops
- Deliberative polling

- Citizen advisory committees
- Consensus-building
- Participatory decision-making

- Citizen juries
- Ballots
- Delegated decision

IAP2 Spectrum

of Public Participation



# Dealing with Emotional Audiences

**People can get emotional—angry—in three situations:**

1. When they have been hurt
2. When they feel threatened by risks not of their making
3. When they believe their fundamental beliefs are being challenged

# Dealing with Emotional Audiences

## Anger can be intensified when people feel:

- Weak or powerless in the face of others who have power
- Treated unfairly, disrespectfully or dishonestly
- Anger is a helpful way of rallying the troops, demonstrating one's own power, or bullying others into accepting their point of view

# Keys to Dealing with Emotional Audiences

- **Sharing Information:** This means that the board/council and the project proponent must share all information—the good, bad and the ugly.
- **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.
- **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.

*“As leaders and decision-makers, your collective goal is to have as many people as 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.”*

# OCDR Top Considerations for Public Engagement

- ✓ Relationship building comes first and remains at the center
- ✓ Know your purpose and design the meeting accordingly
- ✓ Plan, plan, plan
- ✓ Design to promote *problem solving* rather than *position demanding*

# OCDR Top Considerations for Public Engagement

- ✓ Follow-up
- ✓ Remember the 4 C's  
Competence, Caring, Consistency, Communication
- ✓ Set high expectations
- ✓ Create space and time to acknowledge missteps, anger, fear and difference

# Final thoughts

- Remember to work with others on planning public engagement projects - they help you see other perspectives
- Have a plan ready just in case things go bad
  - Can someone offer to talk with the 'disrupter' out in the hall, or perhaps meet the next day to discuss their concerns?
  - Is there any concern for security?
- Call OCDR ahead of time to discuss possible strategies

RESOURCES: The OCDR website @ [www.mn.gov/admin/ocdr](http://www.mn.gov/admin/ocdr)

## Public Engagement Resources

### Tools by Topic

- [What is Public Engagement and Why is it Important?](#)
- [Planning Public Engagement Activities](#)
- [Difficult and Challenging Public Engagement Situations](#)
- [Best Practices](#)
- [Local Government](#)
- [Virtual and Digital Resources](#)
- [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)
- [Evaluation and Measurement](#)
- [Case Studies](#)
- [Organizations](#)
- [All Public Engagement Resources](#)

# Resources

- IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum  
<https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>
- Dealing with Deeply Held Concerns and other Challenges to Public Engagement Processes  
[https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/deeply\\_held\\_concerns.pdf](https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/deeply_held_concerns.pdf)
- Top Considerations for Public Engagement  
[https://mn.gov/admin/assets/Top%20Considerations%20for%20Public%20Engagement\\_tcm36-440660.pdf](https://mn.gov/admin/assets/Top%20Considerations%20for%20Public%20Engagement_tcm36-440660.pdf)
- Dealing with Emotional Audiences  
<https://www.ca-ilg.org/dealing-emotional-audiences>



# Review of Questions and Comments in the Chat

---

---

**THANK  
YOU**



**MARIAH LEVISON**

[Mariah.Levison@state.mn.us](mailto:Mariah.Levison@state.mn.us)

**DAVE BARTHOLOMAY**

[Dave.Bartholomay@state.mn.us](mailto:Dave.Bartholomay@state.mn.us)

<https://mn.gov/admin/ocdr>