

TEN STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY/INDUSTRY CONSULTATION

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INTRODUCTION

This information bulletin outlines some simple but effective strategies for industries wishing to undertake community liaison and consultation with their neighbours. It is based on EPA's experiences and contains some key actions which will lead to greater success with your efforts.

Step 1 – Do some preliminary assessment and find out what the local community thinks about your plant

Put yourself in the shoes of your community neighbours, then ask yourself the following questions.

- Would you *really* like to live next door to your plant?
- Does your plant have any off-site effects?
- Do you have an EPA licence or licences?

If you answer 'no' to the first question, or 'yes' to the others, you could probably benefit from an improved relationship with your neighbouring community.

You can do this in a range of ways including surveys, door-knocks, calling a meeting or an open day. Think about who the 'community' is. Doing this will help you to better target your efforts.

Step 2 – Listen to the community and accept that individuals' perceptions of your company are real for them

Be prepared to really listen and try to understand what the community thinks. This can sometimes be a challenge as you may experience cynicism, mistrust and anger, and hear misinformation about what you do.

Resist the urge to defend yourself – especially in the early stages of consultation. You will find out a lot more about what views exist and in turn ultimately develop more credibility if you are prepared to listen.

Individuals' perceptions of your plant are real for them. This does not make them right, nor do you have to agree. Some of the most significant actions you can demonstrate are to show that you are willing to understand the views of the community.

Step 3 – Don't think that the problem is that the community doesn't understand

Your efforts will be more successful if you consider what you might be doing that makes it difficult for the community to understand you.

Don't 'expert out' people – work to make technical information more easily understood. It takes some preparation on your part but it is worth it.

Step 4 – Be prepared to share the decision making

Develop real opportunities for the community to contribute to project planning.

This means having ‘joint ownership’ of the consultation process – it doesn't mean that the community ‘takes over’ and makes all your decisions for you. You will find that usually that's not what people want. People generally want to be able to live without experiencing off-site effects from your plant.

Do have some tentative ideas and strategies in mind but don't simply impose them on the community. Find out what other people think. This will show you recognise the value of the community as a resource in the process.

Step 5 – Make sure you allow enough time for consultation to occur

Attempting to involve the community early in the process can mean that it will take a little time to plan. It will mean seeking views and reaching consensus about actions but it can be a good investment in the longer term leading to a local community which will develop greater confidence in your plant's activities.

Step 6 – Involve senior staff in the consultation process

The community needs to see that you are serious about consultation. Have staff involved from your company who have the power to make decisions and get things done.

You will gain further credibility if other staff responsible for the day to day running of your plant attend meetings. This helps to ensure that the

community's concerns are also heard by staff responsible for the operations of the plant.

Step 7 – Develop ongoing environmental awareness training for your staff

If you don't already do it, set up processes (preferably ongoing ones) to ensure employees have regular training in sound environmental management practices and awareness about preventing off-site impacts of the plant's activities.

Step 8 – Set up an effective complaints response system

Develop a system that effectively responds to community complaints. Provide staff with training in how to professionally deal with these complaints. Advertise this service in the local community.

Step 9 – Develop communications tools

Use a variety of communication strategies to help the community find out about your activities. These could include newsletters, articles in the local paper and open days.

Step 10 – Be willing to be open to scrutiny

Offer the community the opportunity to verify the environmental ‘soundness’ of your activities. Accept the use of credible independent technical experts to verify your claims. Be prepared to accept the costs for doing this.

FURTHER INFORMATION

EPA can provide further advice and information about community consultation techniques. We can also put you in touch with other people from industry with community/industry consultation experience. For further information please contact:

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