

Are your mobs ANGRY?

How to use the lessons of September 11 for more effective community involvement.

By Lance Decker

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On September 11, in a single moment our society decided to replace conflict and confrontation with wholesale collaboration. People who were previously at odds with each other started working together in a new spirit of cooperation. Peace... unity... harmony reigned. And this wasn't just at the national level... the local projects we were managing seemed to be less controversial, as well.

Unfortunately, by mid March our business was back to normal. The anger, mistrust, divisiveness, NIMBYism, and "old style" political system that drives most public policy making returned. But what caused this five-month interval of goodwill? What circumstances existed during this nation-wide effort to cooperate? Even more important, how can we recreate and apply these strange forces to local public involvement and dispute resolution?

It seemed that three conditions existed in our Country after the attacks.

First, and most importantly, the nation had an **enemy** --- an enemy that everyone could clearly identify. The enemy had a face and a name. Over --- and over --- and over again, we saw the undisputed evidence of our enemy's actions. At that time no one doubted who the enemy was or his intentions.

Second, **the enemy was no longer in some far and distant land**... he was here and he was now! There was no intellectual distance. We could no longer deny our vulnerability. There was a clear and present danger. It was in our own back yard.

Third, **strong leaders emerged** demanding clear, concrete, unambiguous and decisive action. They had a plan. It was swift. It was sure. We knew what needed to be done and our role.

As a result of these three conditions, we came together as a Nation. The magnitude of the attack on our corporate body made us put our localized disputes into perspective. This sense of National unity spread to every controversial bridge, landfill, redevelopment and wastewater project being developed at that time. "Homeland security" were the words on everyone's lips. All other controversies became petty and insignificant.

As mentioned earlier, after the immediate threat of 9-11 passed, people turned their attentions to the local projects that affected them before the attack. The constructive tension between project promoters and the people potentially affected returned. The creative stress that usually improves the long-term quality and performance of a project was back.



So, what did we learn from this experience, and how can we apply it to a raft of community-based disputes that we face at the local level?

First, we learned that nothing brings us together like a clear, identifiable and common enemy. Whether it's a local, regional, national or international issue, threats to our collective welfare bonds a community like glue. Political, religious, or ethnic persuasion be hanged! If we can see the attacker and the attack -- if there is a name and a face to the threat, we are capable of incredible collective agreement and action.

Next, we learned that when crisis is in our own back yard we act with less restraint and greater authority. Evidence the murder of a Sikh convenience store employee by a crazed "patriot" in Mesa, Arizona on September 12th because the guy looked Middle Eastern. We think less and act more. We regress to more primitive behaviors.

Finally, we learned that during times of perceived crisis, even thoughtful, well-meaning people will sacrifice their values and their constitutional rights to leaders who promise a sense of safety and resolution. Leadership will emerge, and the leaders who offer clear, simple, binary solutions... those who have a strength of conviction, enthusiasm, and vision will be affirmed. Leaders who propose restraint, reflection and statesmanship will, unfortunately, be minimized or simply ignored.

Am I suggesting that our National leaders were wrong in mobilizing America after 9-11? Of course not! I am suggesting we can apply these same principals of **enemies, immediacy and leadership** to every public controversy we face as community involvement professionals.

So, before engaging in community-based mediation you may ask yourself these questions:

- Who do the people engaged in a public dispute see as the enemy?
- What is their sense of the threat and what drives their passion?
- Are position-based leaders driving community perceptions, or can statesmanship emerge and generate resolution to the controversy?
- Finally, what's your role in bridging the gap between emotion-based positions and broader community interests?

What have been your experiences? Send us your comments to info@community-involvement.net.

Lance Decker, co-founder of ICI, has been in the business of public involvement for twenty years. We connect our clients with their most observant communities, critics and constituents, in meaningful, productive discussions. Our philosophy states that people affected by a decision have a right to accurate and timely information, and a voice in both policy-making and implementation. With that said, most of our work involves mediating public disputes and conflict! Our tag line is, "We Specialize in Angry Mobs!" We've served governments, nonprofits and private sector organizations for the past ten years.

