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# 10 Tips for Surviving Public Meetings

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## The Adversarial Assumption

People who take the time to attend public meeting are honestly concerned about the issues being discussed, and they probably wouldn't be there if they agreed with the agency's policy direction. It's a safe bet that a good portion of the people in the room hold an adversarial position on the topic. Knowing this is important in preparing for the meeting.

## Understand the Environment

If participants at a public hearing seem to treat you like "the enemy" it's probably because they perceive you as "the enemy." Until you show them otherwise, you symbolically represent a government agency that is asserting some level of control over their world. Until they get to know you as an individual, these folks will not treat you as an individual. You are the collective authority of the state. You, your colleagues and your motives are all suspect.

## Actively Listen, Reflect Comments, Summarize Frequently

All through the public hearing, active listening and confirmation with the group is the best technique for keeping the group focused and on the subject. Try to understand participants' concerns and deal with their fears in a methodic but sensitive way. Frequently summarize the group's themes. "During the past five minutes I heard you say \_\_\_\_\_. Is that accurate?"

## Redirect Emotional Energy

Keep the meeting from degenerating into emotional symbolism by frequently asking the group, "How does your recommendation translate into day-to-day operation?" or "What does that mean to an ordinary citizen?" Another way to develop effective communication with the public at a hearing is to ask speakers if they can define emotionally charged words, phrases and concepts. For instance you might ask a participant, "Can you help me understand what you mean by \_\_\_\_?" This technique will also help the speaker focus on the topic at hand.

## Respectfully Call A Bluff

If a participant is citing data that seems unreasonable to you, indicate in a respectful tone that access to such information would be helpful. "Would you provide that information and the source to all of us so everyone can review it?"



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## **No Cheap Shots!**

Even if you believe a participant is "totally off base", help him or her preserve dignity. SARCASM, PUT-DOWNS AND MOCKERY HAVE NO PLACE IN A PUBLIC HEARING! Admittedly, as a representative of a public agency, you are an easy target for cheap shots by participants. DO NOT RESPOND IN KIND! To do so elevates the emotional temperature of the meeting and makes the crowd sympathetic to your hecklers. Keep your responses focused on the topic, respectful and controlled.

## **Personalize the Feeling of Communication**

To overcome the "us" vs. "them" mentality generated at public hearings, try to use participants' names when addressing them. First names are best if custom permits and it appears appropriate to use them. Try to reduce the emotional distance and build rapport between you and the group. Although self deprecating humor should not be overused, it can be a great ice breaker.

## **Find the Hidden Agenda as Early as Possible**

Although the meeting may be on one specific subject, the public attending such a meeting may have something totally different on their minds. People come to these meetings with specific agendas, and have something specific to say. The longer they have to wait to say it, the angrier they get. Try to determine what's on participants' minds early in the hearing by asking them to identify the issues they want to discuss. By knowing their concerns, you may be able to address these concerns quickly, thus reducing the energy they bring to the event.

## **Keep Your Ego Under Control**

Don't be surprised if an irate hearing participant personalizes the discussion and makes an unflattering comment about your motives in the hearing. They may do this for two reasons. First, the participant may be so scared and emotionally upset about what they perceive is being "done" to them by the government that they lose control and lash out at any representative of the agency. You become the symbol of the agency. Second, the participant may want to put you in a defensive posture. You may then appear as if you're hiding something, or worse yet, you may verbally strike back at the participant. Since you symbolically represent the government institution, if you lash out at the participant, the listeners, uncommitted community and press may sympathize with the person baiting you. In either case, your position as perceived by the group is weakened.

## **Keep a Sense of Humor and Admit Your Humanity**

It may be helpful to simply admit that you don't have all the answers yet, but that you will work with folks to get as many as possible. When all else fails, your good nature and sense of humor can be your salvation. A simple smile, a shake of the head and shrug of the shoulders or a pregnant pause can get you through a tough meeting. Above all, don't lose your temper.

