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Succeeding in the Stakeholder Process: Everything We Need to Know We Learned in Kindergarten

Developing and managing water resources is more complex today than it has been at any time in the past. In the face of growing demand and decreasing supply options, the complexity of this issue will continue to increase.

As we know, there are no new sources of water—only sources that have yet to be put to beneficial human use. The challenge of resource development and management is not one of technological short-comings; the water industry possesses the technology to produce drinking water from remote or previously less-than-desirable sources. The cost of resource development is only a temporary barrier because as the need for water increases, a higher cost becomes acceptable. The challenge is, and will continue to be, how a shared water resource should be put to use in the best interest of human consumption, agriculture, industry, and the environment. When a previously “unused” source becomes available because either technological or cost barriers are overcome, water resource managers must address the concerns of multiple stakeholders with unique ideas in order to deliver beneficial projects.

I was among the many thousands of attendees at this year’s AWWA Annual Conference & Exposition in Atlanta, Ga. Unlike past conferences, though, this year I was able to schedule a slew of meetings around the technical sessions. As a result, I found myself

in several water resource-related sessions. Throughout those sessions I heard two recurring themes: (1) the increasing need to engage diverse stakeholder groups in complex water resource decisions and (2) the concern—and sometimes outright dread—that some utilities have for the stakeholder involvement process. Time and again I hear utilities report on seemingly insurmountable obstacles posed by stakeholder processes. Often conflicts remain unresolved, leaving one or more parties dissatisfied. These breakdowns result from stakeholder processes becoming bogged down in the minutia, tangential issues, and old “baggage” of past ineffective interactions. In the midst of the frustration, it can be easy to lose sight of the need to “get back to the basics” in order to move forward.

Ironically, it is the interpersonal and inter-agency interface that will determine the development and management of water resources in the future. Developing and managing sustainable water resources will be a matter of political, organizational, utility, and stakeholder will. The “will” to achieve sustainability implies a proactive commitment because sustainable solutions require cooperation, and cooperation is rarely achieved reactively.

Unless you live a solitary life, you have experienced stakeholder negotiations. If you have one resource, of any kind, relied on by at least two groups with differing ideas about how that resource should be used, you are in

a stakeholder negotiation. When put into a water resource context, the stakeholder process becomes complex because of the increasing number of stakeholders with sometimes disparate needs. These needs are based on each party's perspective, and each perspective is valid.

During my career, I have been involved with many stakeholder groups addressing issues from regional planning to resource development to project execution to regulatory development. Through Awwa Research Foundation research projects, utilities have shared additional stakeholder experiences with me. I have seen and heard of them going well and not going at all.

While sitting on the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport tarmac waiting to return home, I was passing the time with the in-flight magazine and came across a reference to Robert Fulghum's collection of essays, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Thinking about the essays and my personal experience, I realized that each of the lessons Fulghum described had real application to the challenges of water resource development and management, sustainability, and the stakeholder process.

I saw in Fulghum's 13 "lessons" a template for setting up a stakeholder process to go in the right direction or for getting "back to the basics" when a stakeholder group finds itself floundering. This is all contained in a context that we each learned very early in life. As Fulghum's treatise begins, "Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school." His 13 bits of schoolyard wisdom can serve us well. As professionals, we are in the habit of addressing challenges from the head, when in reality conflicts surrounding water resource issues may be more in the heart.

In putting Fulghum's simple ideas into a water resource stakeholder context I am not presupposing nor implying that water resource development and management is easy or simplistic; it isn't. My intention is to ask each stakeholder, "Are we conducting ourselves according to the basic principles that are at the heart of working cooperatively and for the benefit of a sustainable water supply, for all uses, for future generations?" If not, when faced with seemingly insurmountable, disintegrating, or stalled stakeholder negotiations we would all be well-served if we returned to some basic lessons.

The lessons of Robert Fulghum for each and every water resource stakeholder, as I see them, are:

- **Share everything.** Our water resources are limited, and unlike any time in the past, the demands for those resources overlap. In this "overlapping" environment, every stakeholder's use needs to be seen as valid. Unless all parties are accepting of an outcome where we share everything, everyone eventually loses.

- **Play fair.** The complex issues utilities face today, in order to address tomorrow's water demands, require open and honest communication. Closed-door agreements or covert negotiations undermine trust and eventually the process itself.

- **Don't hit people.** Stakeholders, especially smaller ones, do not appreciate being blindsided with predetermined solutions, collusion, or strong-arm tactics.

- **Put things back where you found them.** The future of sustainable water resources cannot, as in the past, rely solely on developing untapped sources. It will require the management of resources. Resource planners and stake-

holder groups in all regions must begin to look at the recapture and replenishment of resources during excess flow periods, through water reuse, and via aquifer recharge storage possibilities.

- **Clean up your own mess: Take responsibility.** If you have made an error in judgment along the way, admit it and fix it; you will be respected for it.

- **Don't take things that aren't yours.** Population growth, agricultural needs, environmental preservation, and the water resources needed to sustain all three are no longer independent concepts or local/regional issues. Today, these issues are entwined; one can't be discussed without considering the others. The long-term solution to water resources management isn't in bringing surface water and groundwater from elsewhere. Doing so serves only to create a resource house of cards. Demands on water resources must be addressed and solved locally if sound, long-term sustainability is the objective.

- **Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.** During my career, I have seen stakeholder processes struggle, break down, and even fail to start for one reason—old baggage from past interactions. Each of us has our own valid perspective of reality, and it should be no surprise that these perspectives are not the same. We have all made mistakes in failing to see another's point-of-view. We can make great strides when we realize, accept, and rectify these infractions. A sincere apology and meaningful action can go a long way toward getting a difficult process back under way.

- **Wash your hands before you eat.** Don't bring something to the negotiating table that doesn't belong there. Focus on the issue

in front of the group. If there are other issues to be discussed, schedule a time to address those issues. Whether it is a tangential issue of little immediate significance or someone reaching into the chip bowl with a dirty hand, the reaction is the same—the group doesn't know what to do with it. Keep the negotiating table neat and clean.

- **Flush.** Old ideas, antiquated approaches, old "baggage," closed-mindedness, and inflexibility bog down the negotiating process and waste energy that could otherwise be spent on meaningful solutions. A productive group will focus energy on how we can and will not allow discussion of why we can't. Take what doesn't work off the table, and "flush" it away to make room for new ideas.

- **Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.** Coffee, danish, and bagels—even at hotel rates—are an investment. These are the lubricants of the stakeholder meeting machinery. Every meeting goes smoother when they are available. I once forgot this rule when I was an AWWA staffer, and I am still reminded of it on occasion by committee members—13 years later!

- **Live a balanced life.** Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work some every day. Stakeholders cannot be expected to act in each others' best interest if they are convened only as a need arises. Regional stakeholders can best prosper as a group when they have a stake in each others' success. Water resource stakeholder groups should interact continually, on a regular basis. Through this interaction will come an appreciation of perspectives, identification of shared objectives, and a deeper understanding of values underlying a particular position.

- **Take a nap every afternoon.** Long-term resource planning takes time and affects future generations. Start early, take your time, and allow a reasonable amount of time for all involved parties to assimilate the information before moving forward.

- **When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.** Chances are that you now or will in the future share a water resource. You and the other stakeholders need to work together as a unified body to maximize the benefit of that resource. However, as we have all experienced, not everyone plays that nice; it's good to know someone is watching your back.

- **Be aware of wonder.** Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down, and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that. We could all sit down around a table, our personal objectives in hand, dig in our heels, and wait everyone out. Imagine, though, if we sat down, looked at the long-term resource problem, and said, "What if . . . ?"

- **Goldfish, hamsters, white mice, and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we.** Things change. The water resource decisions we make today are not for us. The failure or lasting benefit of those decisions will affect our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. When we as water resource stakeholders sit down around a table, we must demonstrate the conviction and wisdom to make decisions that make sense not for us, but for our descendants. It is that wisdom by which we will be judged.

- **Remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—LOOK.** Look out for each other, look to the horizon, be

creative, and search for the best possible sustainable solution.

As water resources become more stressed between competing uses, the issues surrounding them will continue to be contentious and passionate. If stakeholders can enter into discussions with an attitude of openness and fairness, then these debates should be welcomed—because they will result in the best solutions. Every resource, every debate, every stakeholder group is unique, but there are core lessons, both light-hearted and serious, that can make the process easier. Fulghum finishes his collection with, "Everything you need to know is in there somewhere . . ."—and it probably is. When faced with a challenging stakeholder issue, look past the technical elements and legal hurdles, look to the core issues that create the challenges, and the lesson will be there somewhere. Many complex adult concepts can be boiled down to basic lessons we learned as children if we choose to do so. In the end, we need to realize that everything is connected—it is all about relationships. Those relationships need to be established and nurtured over time. They won't spring up, fully grown, in a time of need. If you have a water resource issue looming on the horizon, the time to begin working on it is now—before the need arises.

Remember, when it is all said and done, at any age there is still nothing better than warm cookies and cold milk and a good afternoon nap.

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