

THE CONTROL GAME

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PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT OR PUBLIC RELATIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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A REFERENCE GUIDE FOR RECOGNIZING POLITICAL/SOCIAL CONTROL TACTICS BY POWER BROKERS, LARGE CORPORATIONS, PUBLIC RELATIONS FIRMS, AND GOVERNMENT ENTITIES.

Tactic 1 -- Make it impossible for people to be involved: These typical control tactics set things up so that it's difficult and inconvenient for interested parties such as the affected public to participate.

Examples:

- Meetings are scheduled at inappropriate locations or times; i.e., during regular working hours, highway rush hours, dinner times, or deliberately conflicting times with similar interest meetings. Strict meeting "*guidelines*" and use of question cards discourages real dialogue and keeps attendees under control.

Variations:

- Schedule lengthy one-way presentations that will not allow give and take exchange. This precludes the public (including the press) from asking questions or clarifications.
- Conveners may insist that all questions be held until the end, by which time people are tired, the meeting area must be vacated, and the press has had to leave to meet deadlines.
- Allow the public limited time, and a limited number of questions that must pertain to their predetermined set of allowable topics; while the conveners drag out their answers, essentially filibustering away the rest of the time for the meeting -- and coincidentally time for open discussion of issues and answers that many attendees showed up for.
- Staff may be trained to be *nice*, while having been trained to *handle the public* by using subtle harassment or baiting techniques, which also discourages public involvement.

These tactics are used to fulfill requirements for public outreach in order to legitimize the process. If attendance is sparse it will be blamed on public apathy, rather than a deliberate effort to exclude public participation. Reject this pretense for public involvement. **Short circuit this tactic by standing up as a group and announcing an immediate press conference that will give the press the real story from the citizens outside of the meeting room or across the street from the building**, then get up and leave as a group. If this is not immediately possible, let the conveners know that your group will hold its own meeting, protest, and/or press conference the next morning and will continue to inform the media of their non-cooperation on these issues.

Tactic 2 -- Divide and Conquer: This is a well-established tactic that effectively places similar interest groups at odds against each other, when they would otherwise be a formidable force for bureaucratic responsiveness and accountability. This tactic uses existing tensions and divisions between organizations. Name this tactic as soon as you recognize it to short circuit its effectiveness. Make sure that everyone understands what interests they share in common, and why it is in their best interest to continue to work together. A few favorite tactics are described below.

Examples:

- **Divide a large issue into many small ones.** This forces people and/or organizations to fight many small battles, dispersing their energies. Small groups working in isolation of each other may not be as effective as coordinating efforts to maximize through solid communication and networking.
- **Provide enough resources to cover only part of the problem.** This can include preparing only a few copies of handouts or important documents so that self-imposed constraints prevent them from being able to provide x, y, or z service -- while it is obvious that there is plenty of budgetary allowance for gratuities, amenities, or items that fulfill their bias or agenda.
- **Appoint a committee using key members of the public -- including appointees with views similar to the convener, funder, or directing agency** to maintain their control of the committee. Their involvement is then publicly highlighted -- whether or not they attend or participate. Their names will be used strategically (sometimes *in absentia*), or photos are used to imply consent, agreement, or consensus with the committee -- although they may object or disagree with the viewpoint or findings of the committee. Citizens (token) used in this manner may or may not be aware of their names or pictures being used to artificially lend credibility to the committee or findings in question. In some cases, they may be unaware that they are considered to be a member of the committee.
- **Many separate tables are used in large banquet or meeting rooms to break a meeting up into small discussion groups.** This effectively keeps valuable information that would otherwise be revealed in the general discussion from being heard by the larger group, which would have enhanced communal brainstorming and questioning of the process or problem at hand. These small group discussions may then be summarized and reported back to the larger group. Carefully placed *shills* or committee members may serve as group leaders to control group feedback. This suppresses any controversial discussions that don't fit the convener's agenda, and inhibits networking or brainstorming on the issue.
- **Seating arranged in "audience fashion" delegates you to a passive role in these meetings.** Short-circuit this by playing *Musical Chairs*. Insist that the tables and/or chairs be moved (circle or horseshoe shape) so that everyone can be an active participant with the conveners or presenters. Put yourselves at the same level and/or table with the power brokers so there is no distance to allow them to feel comfortably in control (no shield). **Convert their agenda to your agenda.**
- **Public relations campaigns (blitzes) into the community** will seek out homeowners associations, service groups, schools, and so on, to present biased, incomplete, or misleading information to sidestep opposition to mould and win over public opinion about key issues.

Variations:

- Conduct private (behind closed-door or *impromptu*) meetings with civic groups, government, or public officials (i.e. city council, county commissioners, etc.) of similar political or philosophical leanings -- without informing citizens or organizations with opposing viewpoints of these meetings.
- Wrong information regarding time and location is provided -- too late to be corrected (*The scavenger hunt*). This ensures that their message will be presented without all sides of an issue being recognized or openly discussed.

The Government in the Sunshine Act legislation was passed by the U.S. Congress to discourage clandestine or private meetings of government bodies or officials for the purposes of excluding general public or interested parties.

Tactic 3 -- Pack the Meeting: The power brokers will encourage employees to attend x, y, or z meeting. They may also establish telephone trees (which we should be doing) to get employees and supporters to pack a meeting to simulate public support for their position on an issue, and to set the tone of the meeting.

Variation:

- Comment or question cards are used in place of a communal microphone for participants to go to, so everyone can hear and participate in the discussion. Their supporters will *stack the deck* of comment cards with time wasters, and may continue filling out more cards throughout the meeting to defuse opposition discussion (*see [tactic 1 -- filibustering](#)*).

Short circuit this by meeting with your neighbors, colleagues, or constituents for a pre-meeting conference to discuss opposition tactics and strategy that are barriers to getting your views aired. Come up with your own list of strategy and critical points, then divide them up among yourselves. Go to the meeting prepared with fact sheets, questions, and comments that support your views. Brainstorm with your colleagues, refine the information, then pass it around the neighborhood, or the target audience for and after the meeting. Call the tactics as you see them occur in the meeting to defuse them. Insist on a fair airing of the issues, within everyone's hearing.

Tactic 4 -- Economic Blackmail: When dealing with politically heated issues, especially "*company town*" polluters, the first threat may be that massive layoffs will occur if they have to: change a process, stop polluting, fix safety problems, clean up contamination, and so on. This is a **Red Herring** scare tactic that should be immediately brought to everyone's attention.

- In 1988, the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Facility (RFP) was faced with changes that included decommissioning, the contractor threatened massive layoffs. Economic developers and chambers of commerce predicted local devastation. To the contrary, the cleanup has been a huge economical boost for subcontractors and RFP personnel, who have nearly doubled the numbers of employees that were needed for full production and chemical recovery of plutonium pits for nuclear warheads.
- Retraining and educational programs have blossomed at local colleges. The people to watch are the Developers and Chambers, who will attempt to create new projects, while "*dumbing down the workforce*" by bringing in minimum wage workers for cleanup jobs, lay off union people, and funnel profits to special interest chums. *Stay united, call that tactic, and make them accountable.*

No one likes to be picketed, boycotted, or pictured negatively in the press -- these citizen tactics are relatively easy to implement.

Tactic 5 -- Give the appearance of action without doing anything: When faced with an obvious need for change, bureaucrats may try to give the appearance of taking action without actually doing anything. **These tactics may sound like this:**

- "We have decided to appoint an advisory, special, sub-committee, or commission to study or handle the problem. We want (or need) members of our group to *volunteer* assistance because we do not have money for staff."
- "Your knowledge, input, or time is so valuable (and so on), we would like you to help us with x, y, or z to work out solutions" (but they will fail to assimilate your information, suggestions, or concerns).
- "We would like to help you by doing x, y, or z for you" -- but the reciprocal help never appears (carrot on the stick).
- "We plan to issue a policy or statement regarding that problem next week, month, year..., so that everyone will know what to do in the future..." *Beware* of bureaucrats stealing your uncompensated time to tie you up, keeping you out of circulation in the community. Volunteerism can be abused, becoming a time quicksand.

Don't accept inconsequential actions, excuses, and "do-nothingitis". Set a reasonable amount of time for genuine action, and then tell everyone that you expect action by that date. Think twice before joining "study committees or advisory groups" that are not policy-changing bodies that have no real power to do anything about the issue or problem in question, are funded and directed by your adversary, or by those that represent the other side of your issue. There may not be an accurate record of what has happened from the beginning, during, or at the end of these efforts. **Refusal to allow the recording of meetings, or have an accurate paper trail to document important meetings and proceedings is a serious red flag of cover-ups and problems.**

Tactic 6 -- Give them a Red Herring, or Get them to Chase the Wrong Bunny: This is an issue or information offered to belittle, patronize, or confound and derail your efforts. When a bureaucrat tries to change the subject from what you are concerned about to what they want you to focus on, they are using a "*Bait and Switch*" routine.

Examples:

- "I don't know what you're talking about; You don't know your facts; That issue is not important; Why are you interested in that issue?; You have not done enough research; You aren't an expert; Your issue is beside the point, irrational, emotional, or not practical; Why don't you check into, or work on x, y, or z, instead?"
- Engaging attendees in detailed explanations or debates that are intended to sidetrack the issue of concern, hoping that in the heat of debate, you will: Give up, get tired, go home, and forget the key issue.

Be aware of time wasters that will eat up meeting time, and are designed to wear you down. When confronted with this tactic, don't get side tracked. You don't have to be an expert to ask questions, ask for information, or to have legitimate concerns.

Write notes throughout the meeting -- this will help keep you on track. Stick to the issues you want to discuss, while making a special note to follow up, or address the other person's issue later, if they genuinely desire to do so.

Tactic 7 -- Refuse to give out information, or make it impossible to get it: Bureaucrats plan that this tactic will discourage you, so that you will give up and go away. The *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA) format may have to be invoked to get cooperation. You must know what information you need, what agency to request it from, and what to look for. The "*Key and Lock*" buzzwords and descriptions must be included, or the very information you seek may be withheld from you.

Examples:

- Bureaucracies protecting damaging information **may try to charge exorbitant fees for information to be searched, copied, and sent to you.** Request fee waivers based upon public interest needs and public right-to-know laws.
- The requestor may be flooded with huge amounts of useless information that is out of order and out of date. This is called a *data dump* in legal circles. This is a common tactic used by legal rivals on cases to eat up valuable pre-trial discovery time. It takes a critical eye, speed reading, and some research or historical knowledge to be able to weed through the useless information to find what you want.

To deal with the system effectively, you need the facts. If you have the facts, the system has to deal with you more openly. Democracy depends on people having the information needed to allow meaningful input and interaction with the system. The refusal to give out information may sound like this:

- "We don't have that information; x, y, or z is not in today, and I'm not authorized to fulfill this request; We can only give out a summary (They decide what is meaningful, included, excluded, or redacted); Why do you think that's important?; Justify your interest, or legitimize your need; We don't think you need that information."

Recognize these tactical phrases meant to put you off the track of the information you need to level the playing field with your opponent, and don't accept lame excuses for non-performance or non-compliance.

STRATEGIES TO SHORT CIRCUIT THE CONTROL GAME

- **AS SOON AS A TACTIC HAS BECOME APPARENT, LABEL IT:** When you name that tactic publicly, it loses its power. You can counter these tactics with a minimum of wasted effort by keeping the lines of communication open with your colleagues and other similar interest organizations.
- **BE OBSERVANT OF INTERACTIONS, TACTICS, AND WHO MAY BE CALLING THE SHOTS BEHIND THE SCENES:** Recognize that although individuals make up the bureaucracy, they should not be the targets of your efforts. Evaluate where strategic counter-tactics would be the most effective. Good mottoes to keep in mind. *Always go to the top, and the squeaky wheel gets fixed.*
- **DO NOT ALLOW BUREAUCRATIC FIGUREHEADS TO LABEL YOU** as a troublemaker, or as someone with emotional or personal problems (i.e.: "Psychiatrically" linked to a site or set of issues, don't have a life

because you volunteer a lot of your time, are a paid staffer or knowledgeable citizen, so your opinion doesn't count, or don't have "x" number of constituents behind you.) to legitimize side stepping serious issues and/or your concerns. Be alert to the *evaluative patronizing concern look*. This is contrived to give the appearance of questioning your mental or emotional stability to elicit a reaction. Keep cool and don't give them the reaction they want from you. Any person might become dedicated to seeking solutions, and become angry or frustrated over the distancing treatment bureaucracies and corporations use to keep the public at arm's length over difficult issues.

- **MAKE YOUR ISSUE OR ADVERSARY AN OBJECT OF INTENSE STUDY:** Never stop questioning your previous conclusions about them. Get all the information you can and keep getting it. Put this information to productive and meaningful use, then network it around.
- **NEVER RELAX AFTER A VICTORY**, and don't underestimate the power of determination.
- **RENEW YOUR OWN OUTREACH REGULARLY** by having current concerns and information prepared and ready to distribute at every opportunity. Use their meetings for opportunities to pass out your own targeted information. Use several people to see that all attendees end up with copies of your information. Ask local copiers or businesses to help duplicate materials.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." -- **Margaret Mead, Anthropologist**

"Ignorance is compounded by the sins of omission." -- **Dr. Edward A. Martell, Radiochemist**

"Reports based on faulty foundations of inconsistent, missing, or biased data are meaningless, misleading, and worthless. To deliberately present bad data as if it were meaningful is scientifically invalid and immoral." -- **Environmental Information Network (EIN), Inc.**