

TWO YEARS ON THE FRONT LINE:
LESSONS LEARNED IN AN INFORMATION OFFICE

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ABSTRACT

Michaelene Pendleton has been operating an information office for the nuclear waste isolation program for almost two years. Her experience has taught her the importance of maintaining credibility in the public eye, while providing accurate information on a highly technical subject. She offers suggestions on how technical staff can maintain that credibility before the general public.

Let me begin by telling you that the title of this presentation isn't exactly accurate. I do operate an information office and I have learned a multitude of lessons, but the office hasn't been in operation for two years--it's actually been only about 21 months. So I've started this talk by being less than absolutely accurate.

So what? Who cares? Get on with the presentation.

All right, I will. But can you believe me? After all, I've started our association with an untruth. I had a good reason for doing so: "One Year, 8 Months, and 21 Days on the Front Line" is a much too long and unwieldy title so I made the arbitrary decision to simplify the information for the sake of convenience.

That's one of the prime lessons I've learned; we must be careful about twisting information, we can't be less than accurate--whatever the good reasons we find to justify our inaccuracies--because someone is going to catch us and then our total credibility is tainted.

This is obviously a very simplistic example, but the principle holds true whether we are discussing the operation of this office, or geohydrologic testing at Gibson Dome, or the socioeconomic issues of high-level waste repositories. We must maintain credibility in the public eye and credibility is a very easily shattered commodity.

Public perceptions on any side of these issues give rise to social concerns and questions which can be addressed, in part, through local information offices.

In June, 1982, the State of Utah opened two nuclear waste public information offices, one in Moab and one in Monticello, the communities closest to the potential high-level waste site at Gibson Dome. When the state ended funding for these offices, in January, 1983, Battelle's Office of Nuclear Waste Isolation began operating them for the Department of Energy. While the sponsorship of the offices

changed, the services provided by me and my Monticello counterpart, Carl Eisemann, remained the same. We act basically as library and information sources, maintaining check-out services for DOE and ONWI technical documents, as well as documents from such diverse sources as the League of Women Voters, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Southwest Research and Information Center, national newsclippings, and environmental magazines; we also answer questions or refer the person to a more appropriate place. We take no position for or against the proposed repository but act as neutral sources where any citizen may obtain answers to questions or rumors. At this point, we are the only operating information offices in the program, although more are planned in other states.

Southeast Utah is one of the most rural areas in the country: Grand and San Juan Counties comprise 11,492 square miles and contain a little less than 20,000 people, with about 5,600 of our population made up of Ute and Navajo Indians on reservations in San Juan County. Our unemployment figures are the highest in the State of Utah. Currently 9 percent of the population of Grand County receives welfare assistance; in San Juan that figure rises to 20 percent. Much of our economic condition is the result of shut downs and layoffs in the mining and milling industry, principally of uranium. We are an area with a long history in the production of uranium--Moab used to call itself the "Uranium Capital of the World". Further, we are an area where the socioeconomic aspects of construction and operation of a high-level waste repository would have a profound impact. The question is: how much of that impact would be beneficial and how much would be negative?

If you ask that question in Moab, your answers will range from pie-in-the-sky predictions of a new economic paradise to cataclysmic portents of the total ruination of our lifestyle. When we've had public information events in Moab, most of the people who attended have fallen into the latter category. Those people--many who make their living from the tourism industry, others who have moved into Southeast Utah specifically because of our large wilderness areas--not only doubt any possible socioeconomic benefits but

also doubt the credibility of "the outsiders who breeze into town, make their pronouncements on behalf of DOE, and then quietly slip away". If you ask the question in Monticello, you will get the opposite response.

While nuclear waste is a problem of national dimension, the socioeconomic impact of a repository at Gibson Dome is the real bone of contention in Moab. In my office, and at public meetings, most questions, even those that seem purely geotechnical or environmental, really reduce down to one question: what will happen to our lifestyle? Will we have enough water for culinary and agricultural purposes? Will the simple fact of a repository, or the possible contamination of the Colorado River, ruin our tourism industry? Will local people be hired for the construction and operation phases? Will outsiders move in and take over our small communities? To the people with these questions, our credibility factor at the moment lies in the minus numbers.

My tenure in the Moab Nuclear Waste Information Office has taught me that credibility has two basic components: (1) the totality of information that is available, and (2) the way in which available information is presented. I'm not in a position to generate information; that is done by other people with more knowledge in their specific disciplines than I will ever acquire. But I have a fair amount of experience in the presentation of information, both by doing it myself and by watching others do it. As you might guess, I have some suggestions to that end.

As an information specialist, I have the easier job; people don't expect me to be able to answer every possible technical question. Those of you who are scientific and technical people have by far the more difficult part; you are expected to be able to answer every possible technical question pertaining to your field--and some that don't. This is made more difficult by the fact that most of you are employed because of your expertise in your discipline, rather than for your public-speaking qualifications.

When you're a technical person presenting information to your peers, you know what you're talking about and so, to varying degrees, does everybody else. And yet, misunderstandings still occur. Consider, then, how much more easily misunderstandings happen when your listeners are the general public, some who have a highly technical background, some who know next to nothing about nuclear waste, some who know only the scary rumors, and others who occupy every possible position on the continuum. Coping with that kind of audience in a credible manner takes a great deal of talent and patience--and a thick skin.

Information requests usually come in two categories: sincere requests and antagonistic requests. Both of these categories require the same amount of care and attention in our answers. We have to face the fact that, to accomplish the repository development program, it has to be sold to the people out there who too often get lumped into the faintly derogatory heading of the "general public". We can't ever forget that the "general public" is composed of single individuals, each of whom has a real concern and a voice that can be raised for or against the program. Which position they choose to take may depend in large part on our credibility.

As an information specialist, I don't have to convince anybody to buy the program; in fact, I couldn't attempt to push any position and still retain my credibility. But for those of you who do

need to convince people that the high-level waste repository program is a technically viable solution to an important problem and can be accomplished with more positive than negative impacts, some easily implemented skills can make a crucial difference in the way that your information is perceived, and therefore, accepted or rejected. It's unfortunate that people don't accept your information simply because you have the technical expertise--but they don't. Your position may be criticized by another in your field who also has fine credentials. This leads to confusion--who is to be believed? When this kind of confusion exists, people tend to believe the person who takes the time and effort to treat them as reasoning adults, capable of understanding the problem and making decisions based on mutually shared knowledge and concern for the welfare of the common good. Many keen observers of human nature have noted that people often tend to react less to what you say than to how you say it. Even though you are certain that your information is accurate, that the program is technically viable, you still have to present it in a way that people will hear it.

Emphasizing only the positive impacts of a repository and totally ignoring or, worse, minimizing the negative impacts does not convince opponents of the repository. At a recent panel discussion, one person asked about the dangers of a transportation accident in her town. The respondent chose to answer by saying that if she wanted to worry about transportation accidents, she should fight the coal industry since 2.5 people per month are killed by coal-hauling trains. While the statement may be true, it did not respond to the valid concern of the questioner. And it is an example of the lack of sensitivity that technical experts often convey.

First, foremost, paramount and above all, don't get your own ego involved. When your audience is antagonistic, remember that you are not being attacked personally--you are only the visible representative of a great, amorphous something that wants to make changes in the lives of the people who constitute your audience.

Second, realize that a "fact" to you may not be a "fact" to your questioner. If we all agreed on the same facts, we'd probably be emplacing waste canisters somewhere right now. Take the time to explain the data base that produced your "fact"--and don't forget to gear that explanation to the technical background of your questioner. I'm not saying that's an easy thing to do, but we must try.

Third, remember that your questioner's concern is real. We all get questions that are, to put it politely, not terribly well-informed. Or it seems that way to us. To the person with the question, it is a sincere request for accurate information--and it deserves to be treated as such. Few of us are perfect speakers; but I've seen people turned off to the program because they received a patronizing, or downright insulting, reaction to a real concern. Your opinion of the question isn't important; your answer to it is.

Fourth, be aware that words can scare people. Jargon is confusing; don't use it. Often we use jargon simply because it's convenient. Too often we use it to promote our own sense of worth or to obfuscate an already confusing issue. Also, too often our answers are vague; we don't really say anything. The unfortunate part is that sometimes we didn't intend to say anything, it just sounded good. Sometimes we don't have the exact information to back up our statements. Consider the phrase "keeping radioactive

releases as small as reasonably achievable". It's a reasonable statement--except that it can scare the daylight out of people. What is "small"? What is "reasonably achievable"? Without some kind of operating definition that will put that statement into human terms, all the old horror stories are dredged up. At one meeting I attended, the statement was made that "(the program has)...chosen to use a sacrificial material for the casks but the cask walls are very thick". Technical people may have accepted that statement. The general public in attendance didn't. "Sacrificial material" is jargon that makes sense to technical people--to a nontechnical person who isn't terribly convinced in the first place, what is heard is the word "sacrifice". The phrase "very thick" also doesn't inspire much confidence in someone who is suspicious of the viability of the program.

Fifth, do involve those individuals who make up the "general public" in every way possible. Leave room for human interaction in your presentation. While this isn't always possible, emphasize that interaction whenever you can, especially in the area of socioeconomic impacts.

We've had several public meetings in Southeast Utah. Only one of those meetings produced positive feedback even among the opponents of the repository. The format of that meeting provided a specific availability of speakers for one-on-one discussion. The decision was made to go one step further down that path of involvement and we subsequently set up a planning meeting for our next information exchange. At the planning meeting, program personnel and local citizens--from both extremes of viewpoint--decided upon the next information exchange format: the speakers, the date, the time, and the place. The feedback from that planning meeting has been overwhelmingly positive. Involving people in decision-making activities has two important benefits: they then have some power over the changes in their lives and they share the heat. They are, to at least some extent, on your side because you've given them a vested interest in getting the problem solved. You've moved them from antagonists to people with whom you can work--not necessarily lead, but cooperate.

Sixth, don't be afraid to be fallible. Credibility is too often confused with infallibility. I firmly believe that the words that can sometimes contribute most to credibility are "I don't know". Except for those individuals who are there only to catch you out, most people accept the fact that no one knows everything about a given subject. Relax. Be comfortable admitting that your questioner has come up with a lollapalooza of a question. But, do offer to make personal contact with the answer as soon as you can. And then make sure that you do that followup. If the answer doesn't yet exist, be straight with that. When you've done that, you've made some points for the credibility of the whole program.

Last, if you're uncomfortable with a public speaker's role, suggest that someone else in your area be tapped for the assignment. I realize it's difficult to be less than supremely capable before the person who signs your paycheck, but if you're not happy in front of an audience, that audience isn't going to be happy with you--and that will reflect upon the program.

We, unfortunately, have to live down a reputation that isn't necessarily our fault. Too many of us still fall back on catch phrases such as "No one has ever been killed in a civilian nuclear reactor". It doesn't matter that the qualifier

"civilian" makes this a true statement. It doesn't matter that our technology has improved exponentially. People know about SL-1, they know about St. George, Utah--and few people make an emotional differentiation between defense activities and the production of electricity. Let's start by admitting that we're dealing with a dangerous substance and, without contributing to the horror stories, not downplay that danger. Then, through open communication that doesn't try to cover up our failures, let's convince people that we've learned from those failures.

In the socioeconomic area, we must admit that all we can do is predict possible scenarios. We can't guarantee that life will be paradise in the affected communities. We must live with the possibility that the quality of life for some segments of the population--primarily those on fixed incomes who will have to cope with inflation--will deteriorate. We must also live with the possibility that repository opponents will magnify that deterioration completely out of proportion to even the worst possible scenario.

It's pointless to disagree or become frustrated with the inaccuracies of public perception. For this program to succeed, we must become like Caesar's wife--above suspicion. That's a tall order, but presenting the program in an open, concerned manner will go far towards improving our public image. And let's not forget that we'll never convince everyone, nor should we; skepticism is a sign of a healthy culture. We've never been a nation of sheep that can be herded down whatever path the current powers dictate.

And so--what are the basic lessons that two years, more or less, on the front line have taught me? Be accurate with our information. People out there are not the enemy. The desire for information, however phrased, is real. Admit our fallibility. Don't get our egos involved. Do involve people in the process whenever possible. And don't expect to succeed with everyone.

At this point, I hope I have succeeded with some of you. I realize that I probably haven't succeeded with all of you, and I'm fully cognizant of the fact that, if I go on much longer, I'll have operated my information office for 1 year, 8 months, and 22 days and I'll have to start this whole thing all over again. And so--thank you for your attention.