

## THE CHANGING NATURE OF DOE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last decade the Department of Energy has been slowly changing the way it perceives and interacts with outside groups. The Department of Energy (DOE) is relatively new to encouraging public participation in its affairs and therefore needs to change its "culture". This new culture includes seeking out constructive criticism, being solicitous of and open to public views, and creating an atmosphere in which problems are identified and resolved cooperatively.

This paper describes paradigm shifts in DOE away from "public control" through "public persuasion" to "public participation". The "control paradigm" grew out of the secrecy surrounding weapons production. Amid reduced military budgets and a growing demand for public information, DOE began sharing information but only to put DOE in the best possible light; the public "persuasion paradigm". Later, increasing public concerns and value controversies reigned in the public "participation paradigm" under which the views of the parties interested in DOE decisions are integrated into DOE's decision-making process. Under the new paradigm, DOE presents information about activities more objectively and identifies ways for the public to comment upon and affect DOE activities and plans.

A few parts of DOE still operate under the control paradigm, a far larger percentage operate under the public persuasion paradigm, while an increasing number operate under the public participation paradigm. Therefore, public organizations who interact with the Department are bound to get different reactions and treatment depending on the paradigm of the DOE personnel interacting with them. Direct and indirect mechanisms to continue adoption of this new paradigm are discussed.

### BODY

Over the last decade the Department of Energy has been slowly changing the way it perceives and interacts with outside groups. Nowhere is that change more evident than in the Office of Environmental Restoration and Waste Management (EM). From its inception EM has espoused an open door policy and taken concrete steps to enable outside groups to impact its decisions. This philosophy was first expressed in the original EM Five Year Plan (1). The plan emphasizes that as an agency DOE is relatively new to encouraging public participation in its affairs and therefore needs to change its "culture". The plan outlines the principles that embody the new culture including seeking out constructive criticism, being solicitous of and open to public views, and creating an atmosphere in which problems are identified and resolved cooperatively. DOE made the commitment to address environmental problems in an open, forthright manner through effective communication with Indian Tribes; local, state, and federal agencies; and the general public. The commitment included listening to DOE's critics as well as its supporters and treating the public as a partner and resource in the decision-making process. The goal was to assist members of the public to actively influence DOE's policies.

Despite these promises and the various activities undertaken to make good on them, outside groups continue to express frustrations with DOE. Some state and tribal government representatives, as well as affected citizens closest to the contaminated DOE sites, feel ignored and overwhelmed by a DOE that appears to them to be making decisions in isolation. DOE continues to be perceived as using public participation processes to defend decisions already made without meaningful dialogue involving the affected public (2). A recent study by DOE showed that of the stakeholder groups that routinely interact with DOE only 6 percent reported "a great deal" of confidence in DOE and only 14 percent reported "quite a lot of confidence" in DOE. These percentages are much lower

than those reported for the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (see Fig. 1). (3)

How come there continues to be such widespread distrust of DOE despite its commitments to meaningful public participation? I believe part of the answer lies in understanding the different public paradigms various parts of DOE and DOE employees operate under. By public paradigm I mean the basic framework for understanding and thinking about public interaction. In this article I will describe three paradigms, "the public control" paradigm (mostly past), the "public persuasion paradigm" (now in decline), and the "public participation" paradigm (in rapid ascension), each impacting how DOE and its employees react to and involve the public.

#### The Control Paradigm

DOE and its predecessor, ERDA, grew out of a strong AEC culture devoted in large part to the national defense mission to produce nuclear materials for nuclear weapons. The classified nature of this work demanded secrecy, and formal structure erected to protect national security engendered a policy that shared information on a strict and narrowly defined need-to-know basis. The general public was viewed as suspect and something to be avoided. This view was never questioned through World War II and most of the way through the cold war. As with most federal agencies DOE was viewed almost as omnipotent in its area of expertise and therefore subject only to congressionally mandated oversight. This paradigm is declining (see Fig. 2).

#### The Public Persuasion Paradigm

Starting in the 1960s as the cold war started to wane, DOE witnessed the rise of the public persuasion paradigm (see Fig. 3). For the first time the agency saw the need to build support for its programs amid reduced military budgets and a growing demand for public information. During this time DOE

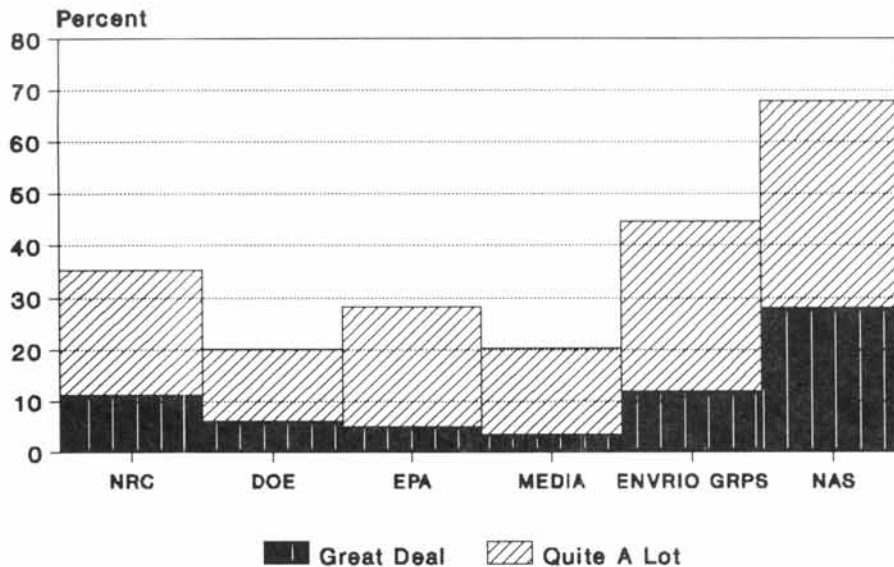


Fig. 1. Stakeholder confidence in DOE compared to other organizations.

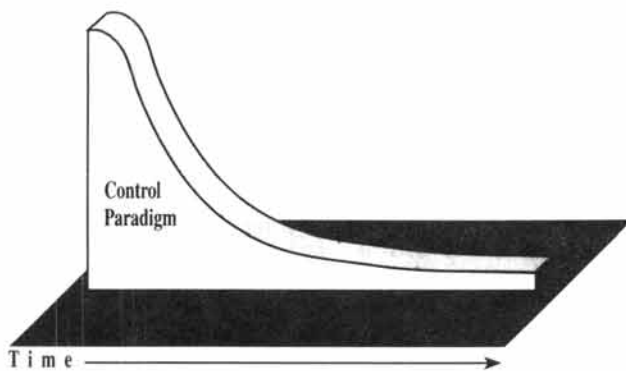


Fig. 2. The public control paradigm is in decline in DOE.

initiated large scale public information campaigns, introduced the idea of site tours and began to develop outreach activities to a wide variety of community groups. This was the era of the "Your Friend the Atom" and visits from laboratory scientists to schools all over America promoting the benefits of nuclear energy and need for nuclear weapons.

DOE was, for the first time, sharing information with the public, however it was clearly doing it in a way that put the Department in the best light possible. While DOE was no longer immune from public scrutiny it was still afforded great respect and most people deferred to "the experts" within the agency when it came to developing energy policy.

### The Public Participation Paradigm

During the 1970s and 1980s the public became increasingly frustrated with DOE's emphasis on technical facts and assumptions as opposed to discussing and understanding public concerns. DOE for the first time was having to deal with value controversies (e.g. was nuclear weapons production worth the perceived risks to local communities?) in addition to scientific controversies. At the same time DOE was starting to be held accountable to more stringent environmental laws,

such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA); the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976 (RCRA); and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980 (CERCLA).

As a result of these pressures, parts of DOE began to adopt a public participation paradigm under which the views of the parties interested in DOE decisions (i.e. interested and affected individuals, organizations, state and local governments, Indian tribes, environmental groups, and other federal agencies) are integrated into DOE's decision-making process. Under this new paradigm, value controversies once ignored or avoided are actively engaged. Scientists and engineers are taught to recognize that, while scientists are perhaps the most well qualified to argue the likelihood of a particular contaminant reaching an aquifer, only the public can determine whether that risk is acceptable or not.

One of the most important differences between the public participation and public persuasion paradigms revolves around the perspective from which information on DOE's activities is provided. Public persuasion programs present information about the agency and its activities in the most favorable way possible. In contrast, public information materials under the new paradigm attempt to present information about DOE activities more objectively and to identify ways in which the public can comment upon and affect DOE activities and plans.

As depicted in Fig. 4, currently different parts of DOE operate under the different paradigms. A few parts of DOE still operate under the control paradigm, a far larger percentage operate under the public persuasion paradigm, while an increasing number operate under the public participation paradigm. Therefore, inconsistent messages are sent to both internal and external parties. Public organizations who interact with the Department are bound to get different reactions and treatment depending on the paradigm of the DOE personnel interacting with them. While this is not an ideal situation, it is, I think, at least understandable. It takes time for large organizations to change, to adopt a new paradigm.

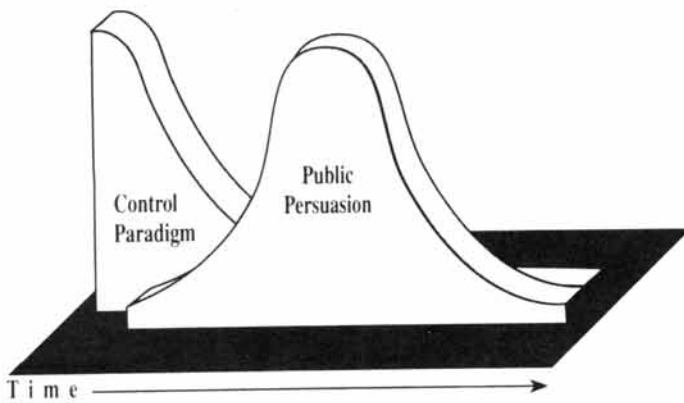


Fig. 3. The public persuasion paradigm is declining.

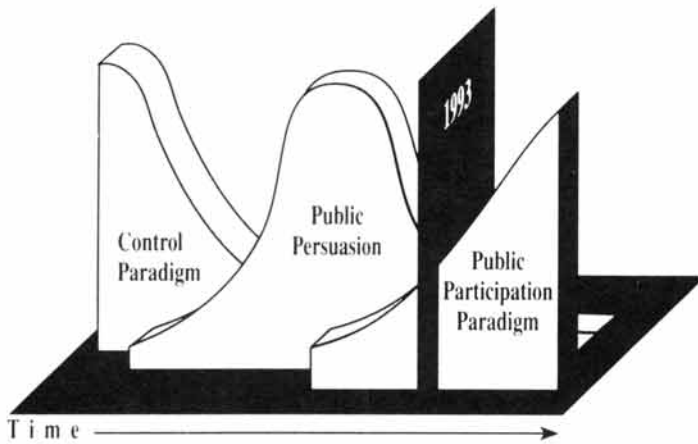


Fig. 4. The public participation paradigm is supplanting the control and persuasion paradigms.

#### **Institutionalizing the New Public Participation Paradigm**

As mentioned earlier, EM has made great strides toward adopting the new public participation paradigm. It has entered into formal discussions with concerned stakeholders and created several venues for meaningful public participation. These include the Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Advisory Committee (EMAC); the State and Tribal Government Working Group (STGWG); the EM Stakeholders Forum; The Federal Facility Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (FFERDC) and the Memorandum of Understanding with the Western Governors' Association on Environmental Restoration and Waste Management. (See Appendix A.) (4) While these activities create the necessary external mechanisms to institutionalize the paradigm shift, additional techniques are needed to influence the internal operating paradigm. (5)

One of the techniques EM is employing to hasten the paradigm shift is role modeling behavior consistent with the public participation paradigm. Senior EM managers have made it a priority to directly interact with the public. Senior EM officials have routinely represented the department at EMAC, FFERDC, and STGWG meetings. This communicates to all DOE employees the importance the Department places on public participation.

A second method EM is exploring for encouraging adoption of the new paradigm is positive reinforcement. For example one option EM might consider is tying promotion and salary increases to effective public participation. This would allow EM management to reinforce behavior consistent with public participation.

A third approach is to ensure that the organizational expectations of the new paradigm are communicated throughout DOE. That is, communicating the norms and values consistent with the new paradigm. EM has produced and distributed a strong public participation policy statement and created weekly public participation mailings to those responsible for implementing the policy. In addition, EM has created a strong network of headquarters and field personnel who meet on a quarterly basis to update each other and share information.

In addition to these direct attempts to bring about the new paradigm, EM is also attempting to utilize indirect mechanisms, factors that in turn influence adoption of the new paradigm. These include:

**Recruitment:** Because of its rapid growth EM has had the opportunity to recruit personnel from around the country and from many organizations. For this reason EM has the opportunity to recruit those persons who will mesh smoothly with the new paradigm

**Training the Existing Workforce:** EM has initiated a national public participation training program for all of its program managers. These trainings will be led by senior EM officials who are best able to exemplify the new paradigm. In addition, informal public participation seminars held over breakfast with the most senior EM managers have been initiated allowing them to keep up with public participation developments on the cutting edge.

**Removing Physical Barriers:** DOE and EM are taking active steps to remove security guards and gates where they are no longer needed. This allows a working atmosphere that is more conducive to public participation. DOE is also reviewing and scrutinizing the need for security clearances which gives a positive message to DOE employees that increasingly our work is something that should be shared and discussed with the public not hidden from them.

Transition into the public participation paradigm will not be easy or even for DOE. Some DOE officials will feel threatened, others will cling to old arguments that public groups do not have "the expertise" to be involved in technical decisions. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift has begun in earnest at DOE and the advent of new information technologies and increased interest in DOE issues will demand that the shift continue. By utilizing the direct and indirect mechanisms discussed above, EM should be able to stay at the forefront of the new paradigm, helping to usher in a new era for the Department.

#### **REFERENCES**

1. U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). 1989 Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Five-Year Plan. DOE/S-0070, U.S. Department of Energy, Washington, D.C.
2. Federal Facility Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee. 1993. "Recommendations for Improving the Federal Facility Environmental Restoration

Decision-Making Process and Setting Priorities in the Event of Funding Shortfalls". Interim Report. Keystone Center, Keystone, Colorado.

3. Data are from a telephone survey of representatives from stakeholder organizations who have frequent communication with the Department of Energy conducted in Septem-

ber and October, 1992. Further details available by contacting the author.

4. A brief description of each of these activities is contained in appendix A.

5. BAKER, E.L. 1980. "Managing Organizational Culture." Management Review July.