

CLARITY CARE COMPETENCE

Do you promote the three C's of effective communication?

By Steven C. Orlick

The decline in public confidence in much of the planning profession in recent years has been accompanied not surprisingly by an equal drop in the morale of many planning practitioners. Simply put, these planners feel that they have been victimized, both by an ignorant and greed-ridden public in general, and by self-serving politicians in particular. As evidence of their plight, they point to attacks by the public whenever they hold meetings to solicit "input;" to planning commissioners who often ignore staff recommendations; to politicians who occasionally use them as scapegoats during times of crisis; and to newspaper editors who relegate planning issues to the back pages, and who assign their least experienced reporters to cover important planning meetings. The truth of the matter is that many times planners have been their own worst enemies simply because they are unable to communicate their ideas clearly.

For example, the planning commission of a small community on the central California coast has been asked by the city council to consider different proposals for increasing tourism while maintaining the community's character, and to make policy recommendations. The planning staff has thoroughly studied the problem and is presenting its finding to the commission during one of its regular Tuesday night meetings. During the presentation, one of the staff reports to the commission and lay audience: "It is the staff's feeling that the interface of existing and future tourist commercial uses with residential districts should be designated as 'sensitive sites' and architectural review and site planning should be utilized to ensure the compatibility between tourist, commercial and residential uses where they directly abut." Four of the five commissioners furrow their brows and look at each other and at the staff member. They are trying to figure out what he is

saying, as they have been for over an hour. The audience looks dazed and bored. The fifth commissioner is asleep.

What's it say? Or consider this example. The planning department of a small midwest community has just issued a report entitled, "A Proposed Revision of the Land Use Element of the Comprehensive Plan—Draft." The department is seeking public comment on the document before presenting a final draft to the city council for adoption. A "concerned citizen" sees an announcement of the availability of the report in the newspaper and obtains a copy. On the first two pages of the report, she reads:

"... In prescribing urban land use, the land use element defines population distribution, residential density standards and non-residential intensity or character for various categories of use which, collectively, determine land use 'capacity.'

The overuse of jargon is a deliberate practice in every profession, designed to segregate "experts" from "non-experts."

"... Although the City, County and region are relatively rural and appear capable of providing ample room for new residents, commerce and industries, each is confronted with some known and several undefined finite resources... While additional water supplies, which may be partially available to the City, have been allocated to the County and region, these limited sources must be imported or redistributed to portions of the region and conserved considering competing demands and potential, adverse impacts still not fully defined."

The woman decides not to read any further. The planning department receives only one piece of "citizen input," a handwritten note from a man which says, "I have just read your report. What's it say?"

These two cases are obviously extreme examples of breakdowns in communication. In each situation there was some planning message that needed to be delivered which wasn't. Unfortunately, this kind of failure is quite common in current planning practice. The "communication problem" in planning can be traced to the following general sources: 1) overuse of jargon; 2) verbosity; 3) illiteracy; 4) carelessness; and 5) a lack of planning skills or knowledge.

Overuse of jargon. The first exposure of an average citizen to planners and their products is usually a befuddling experience. Planners tend to talk and write using language that can only be understood by other planners (even this is sometimes debatable!). Terms like "infrastructure," "interface," "modal split," "urban reserve," "negative declaration," "economic base," and an almost infinite number of others are

certain to confuse even the most interested and intelligent member of the public. The overuse of jargon is certainly not unique to the planning profession. It is a deliberate practice in every profession, designed to segregate "experts" from "non-experts." Unfortunately, in the process of trying to convince the public that planners' advice should be heeded, planning practitioners expend considerable effort (often unknowingly) to keep the public ignorant. Even the less perceptive members of the public immediately become aware of this, and thus reject

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not only the planners' ideas but usually the professionals themselves.

Somewhat related to the overuse of jargon is the long-winded nature of most things that planners write or say. "If you can't dazzle 'em with brilliance, snow 'em with _____ (quantity)," appears to be the philosophy behind the typical planning presentation. The public usually thinks that planning meetings and hearings are long and boring, and not worth the time and effort to attend. Producing two-inch thick impact statements or general plan reports is another conscious or subconscious method used by planners to limit public involvement in the planning process. "Why say it in five words when you can use five

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thousand?" is an unfortunate attitude which planners develop from a sense of professional insecurity associated with an incorrect assumption about what the public and elected officials expect. For some inexplicable reason, planners equate productivity and personal and professional worth with quantity. As a result, any "brilliance" their ideas have is lost in the exhaustion it takes to find it.

Illiteracy. A general problem associated with many college graduates today, not just those with planning degrees, is the growing deterioration in basic English skills: grammar, spelling, writing, reading and speaking. The causes of this serious problem have been variously assigned to the public school system, parents who let their children watch too much television, colleges that have no real literacy requirement for entrance or graduation, planning professors who do not require their students to write clearly, concisely, and properly, and a number of other places. However, simply assigning the blame for this situation does nothing to alter it. English, the language that most Americans understand and use, is seen as a "second" language to planners, with "plannerese" (confusing flow charts and maps, incomprehensible reports, and the like) as the first. It may even be true that sloppy use of English is the product of sloppy thinking. Certainly any degree of

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illiteracy reduces the ability of planners to assimilate new knowledge themselves, and to transmit it to others.

The absence of caring about what one is doing is evident both in the ways planners choose to communicate, and in the manner in which they handle each of those ways. Most planners go about their work and communicate it to the public and their elected representatives in a somewhat detached manner. The reasons for this include the deadening effect of bureaucracies; not living in the communities for which planners are developing plans; ambition and job mobility; an "I know what is best for you" attitude; and being in a profession one doesn't appreciate or really enjoy. In other words, holding down a job to get a paycheck. There is little wonder that many planning meetings are dull and that many planning reports are impossible to read and seem filled with mindless drivel. The planners didn't care enough about what they were doing to make them otherwise!

Lack of skills. A major reason why many planners prepare unreadable reports and unusable maps, charts and tables, and often cannot get their ideas across verbally in meetings, with the public, elected officials or the planning commission, is inadequate professional education and training. There are three possible sources of this problem: the curricula of planning schools, the failure of planning students to assimilate knowledge, and poor hiring practices. A cursory review of the catalogs of several planning schools shows that most curricula contain only one or two courses in graphic or visual communication techniques, and perhaps a single required course in "speech." Very few include even a single course in technical or report writing. In fairness to the planning programs, most have studio or laboratory courses that of necessity directly address the communication of solutions to planning problems. Perhaps as planning faculty have attempted to cover the growing body of knowledge associated with the field they have simply gotten "sloppy" with their emphasis on the clear communication of information and ideas. Gerald Luedtke in a recent issue of *Practicing Planner* (March, 1978) suggests, "Planning educators should devote more effort to improving the writing skills of planning students." His critique should be extended to other methods of communication as well.

Assuming that communication skills appropriate to planning have been adequately covered in a planning student's formal education, the responsibility for any failure to develop those skills must rest with the individual student. Obviously, many students do not take their education seriously and thus never really acquire the skills and knowledge in the first place. Still others may have forgotten what they learned, and as practitioners after graduation, they have not kept their skills current. A planning degree should, but does not necessarily, indicate that a student has acquired certain basic communication skills.

Planning directors and personnel officers must bear a major responsibility for whom they hire and what skills those persons possess. The number of persons in planning departments holding down "planner" jobs with no formal planning education is considerable and even remarkable, given the large number of planning graduates produced by planning schools each year. Job announcements still read "degree in planning or related field," with the extreme likelihood that someone hired without a planning degree has received little or no training in the communication of planning ideas.

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Certainly, communication of planning problems and solutions must begin with a sound understanding of the complex nature of the problems themselves, and ways to generate and select appropriate solutions. Knowing what you are talking about facilitates good communication and enhances the possibility of selecting a communication technique that is appropriate to the problem at hand. A planning degree does not guarantee successful communication, but it greatly increases its likelihood.

Do's and don'ts. Simply stated, the purpose of (public) planning is to provide sound information to the citizenry and elected officials in order to facilitate wise decisions that will produce a desirable future. If planning is to be a valuable aid to decision making, the assistance it provides must be accurate and clearly presented. Below is a list of some basic communications practices for

planners to follow and some pitfalls for them to avoid. It is directed at the individual planner in a public agency, but is equally relevant to a planner in a private consulting firm, to a planning student, and to a planning administrator in evaluating the performance of his or her staff.

Documents, Reports, Pamphlets

Always:

1. Identify and write for a specific audience.
2. Set a length limit and stick to it.
3. Have a non-planner proofread what you've written.
4. Strive for simplicity, brevity, and clarity.
5. Keep a dictionary on hand (and use it!).
6. Use graphics and examples to support or clarify ideas.
7. Summarize the highlights of what you've written and place the summary at the beginning of the report.

Never:

1. Use jargon, but if you must, clearly define the terms you use.
2. Write more than can reasonably be expected to be read and understood.
3. "Pad" what you've written with irrelevant and nonessential information to prove "productivity."
4. Allow your thinking and work to become sloppy and unprofessional.
5. Employ graphics that do not clearly support ideas explained in the written text.
6. Take your writing skills for granted ("Oh, the secretary will fix the grammatical and spelling errors.")

Most of the above 13 points are fairly self-explanatory, and the reader can certainly add others to the list. However, the first point, knowing your audience, needs some elaboration. The written products of planning efforts are usually read by one or all of three groups: laypersons, other planners and other governmental professionals. All too often general plans, downtown studies, environmental impact reports, and other planning documents appear to have been written only for other planners to read, as evidenced by the excessive use of jargon and technical language discussed earlier. This is unfortunate, for while some planning reports may win an APA or other professional award, many don't gain the appreciation of those persons who must live and implement the planners' idea. Plan-

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could do it for themselves, rather than rely on paid union staff to do so for them. If periodic surveys of wages, fringe benefits and working conditions were done by APA, additional information would be readily available to members for their use in annual negotiations.

This service would be equally valuable to private sector planners. All too often private sector firms do not have a clearly defined, formal progression of job responsibilities and pay levels.

3. *Conduct management training seminars.* Finally, good management is perhaps the most important ingredient in establishing a positive working environment, whether in the public or private sector. Again, most planners have not received training in management practices and procedures, having to learn on the job instead. APA is in an excellent position to establish a management forum as one of its technical divisions, providing articles, seminars and conferences on the array of administrative skills and procedures that are part of good management.

Unique opportunity. None of these recommendations is that controversial or bold. They do not push APA toward siding with either labor or management. Rather, they attempt to prevent the adversary relationship that normally occurs in the collective bargaining process from disrupting the professional status of all planners.

The newly formed American Planning Association has a unique opportunity to address this issue. As the sole spokesman for all planners, it is in a position to broaden its scope of responsibility and services.

But this is also a challenge, for APA must grow and change over time to keep pace with the needs of the profession. The demographic wave of war babies is now producing an ever increasing number of planning graduates seeking a limited number of jobs. If APA does not provide relevant services to those young planners, they may never join the organization, choosing instead to rely on unions to enhance both their economic benefits and their professional status.

Obviously, actions to enhance the economic status of planners must proceed carefully. Emotions run high on the question of unionization among many professionals, and it is incumbent on APA to make it clear from the outset that it is not seeking to take sides. □

CLARITY *Continued from page 8.*

ning reports must be tailored to the backgrounds of each specific group of readers. Perhaps a general plan or other document may have to be rewritten for each specific group. The additional support for planning that may result from an investment of this seemingly extra effort may more than offset the costs involved. Planners now spend a lot of time and money collecting and analyzing data, but considerably fewer resources are devoted to the other end of the process—clearly communicating ideas and proposals to a diversity of client groups.

Public Meetings, Hearings, Planning Commission and City Council Sessions

Always:

1. Identify and speak to a specific audience.
2. Keep presentations short, and focus only on highlights.
3. Leave more time for questions and discussion than was used for the presentation.
4. If possible, practice the presentation ahead of time.
5. Be a good listener, giving each person who speaks your careful attention.
6. Anticipate likely questions and prepare answers ahead of time.
7. Prepare and distribute an outline of what you are going to say.
8. Check the working condition of slide projectors, etc., and keep spare equipment on hand.

Never:

1. Speak longer than about an hour without a break.
2. Read notes, but rather use them only for reference and to organize ideas.
3. Speak so long that not enough time is left for a full discussion.
4. Act defensively, search for excuses, or give circuitous answers to questions. B.S. never goes unnoticed.

Obviously, many of these points overlap some of those noted above related to written communication, and the reader again probably can add others based on his or her own personal experience. The necessity of knowing the audience and tailoring an oral presentation accordingly again cannot be overemphasized. In planning, perhaps more than in any other field, communication must occur in two directions, the planners with the audience, and vice versa, for both groups must work together if planning is to be successful. Therefore, an important skill which planners must develop is knowing

when not to speak; that is, when to listen. Planners must also learn *how* to listen so that each person who says something (no matter how seemingly trivial or irrelevant) receives the feeling that he or she matters and that planning meetings, etc., are worth attending. Follow-up letters or phone calls may be a useful mechanism for continuing dialogue begun in public hearings or meetings.

Remember the 3c's. Planners have been talking only to themselves for too long. Some planning departments already have begun to alter this damaging situation. For example in California, the City of San Luis Obispo's Community Development Department has hired a former newspaper reporter to rewrite all documents, public notices, and literature produced by that department, putting it all in jargon-free language that the public can understand. Also in California, the former Planning Director of the County of San Mateo admonished his staff to follow the K.I.S.S. method of communication (Keep It Simple, Stupid!). Efforts such as these are steps in the right direction, but much remains to be done if planners are to regain public confidence and support.

There are three general places where improvements in communications skills must begin. The first is in planning schools, where planning educators need to place a greater emphasis on developing writing, graphics and speaking skills. The second is at the managerial level in planning departments, where planning directors need to drill into their staffs the importance of writing and speaking in a manner that can easily be understood by non-planners. Their future hiring of competent persons with formal planning educators would also help. Finally, and most importantly, if the individual planner knows he or she does not possess sound writing, graphic or oral skills, he or she should work at developing those skills. Perhaps additional education and closer attention to what one is doing will be required. Practicing planners are urged to remember the three C's of effective communication: Clarity, Competence, and Care. Write and speak clearly, acquire and have confidence in your planning knowledge, and show some pride in your work. By using this basic prescription, planners will cease being their own worst enemies and will gain much needed support for their proposals. □