Dealing with an Angrier Public – Part One

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<table>
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<th>Citation</th>
<th>Susskind, Lawrence, and Patrick Field. &quot;Dealing with an Angrier Public – Part One.&quot; ACResolution, July 2012. © 2012 Association for Conflict Resolution</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Published</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cbuilding.org/publication/article/2012/dealing-angrier-public">http://www.cbuilding.org/publication/article/2012/dealing-angrier-public</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>Association for Conflict Resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Final published version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessed</td>
<td>Thu Dec 27 15:07:07 EST 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable Link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/89145">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/89145</a></td>
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Dealing with an Angrier Public

LAWRENCE SUSSKIND (/ABOUT/BIO-LAWRENCE-SUSSKIND/) PATRICK FIELD (/ABOUT/BIO-PATRICK-FIELD/)
ACResolution: The Quarterly Magazine of the Association for Conflict Resolution

July 2012

In 1996, we published the book Dealing with an Angry Public (/publication/book/dealing-angry-public). In it we raised concerns about the distrustful attitudes that citizens have toward government and corporations, and the inability of these institutions to respond to public concerns in a robust, inclusive, and effective way. We put forward six principles that might help win back the public’s trust. We expected that leaders and organizations that adopted these principles would be better off.

DEALING WITH AN ANGRY PUBLIC: THE MUTUAL GAINS FRAMEWORK

1. Acknowledge the concerns of the other side
2. Encourage joint fact finding
3. Offer contingent commitments to minimize impacts if they do occur; promise to compensate unintended effects
4. Accept responsibility; admit mistakes, and share power
5. Act in a trustworthy fashion at all times
6. Focus on building long-term relationships

We can now cite hundreds if not thousands of cases in which our Angry Public principles and related tools and techniques increased trust, decreased public anger, and resulted in positive results. For instance, Chevron, embroiled in hundreds of community disputes in Nigeria, decided to stop negotiating community by community as mineral extraction proceeded. Instead, Chevron decided to negotiate region by region to increase fairness and consistency. And when that change was not enough, they engaged in a careful evaluation of their community benefits program, calling on 75 leaders across the country to conduct almost 1,000 interviews that led to the recommendation that they negotiate regional compacts.

As another example, after almost a decade of denial, delay, and controversy, the U.S. Air Force took one of the most controversial Superfund sites in the country and transformed it into a model regulatory partnership, featuring inspiring examples of citizen engagement, community restoration, and creating a showcase for energy efficiency and renewable energy.

More broadly, many corporations and governments around the world are now incorporating a serious commitment to sustainability in their operations, addressing social, economic, and environmental issues simultaneously. Corporate stakeholder engagement efforts have led to the adoption of voluntary standards for human rights. The U.S. military has not only become the most trusted institution in the country (though not necessarily overseas), but it has also deployed intensive community engagement and non-combat efforts as part of its counter-insurgency efforts, learning the hard way, that social capital (soft power, as Joseph Nye and Samantha Powers call it) is often more effective than hard, military allocations.

Yet in most respects our desire to spur a different kind of public discourse has not panned out. We have not seen substantial changes in government or corporate behavior. Our six key ideas have been incorporated into the operating manuals of all kinds of organizations, across a great many geographies, but the overall effect has been sporadic and too often invisible or ineffective. We continue to work with groups trying to do better, but we appear to be surfing on deeper American political currents rather than transforming them.

Neither of us imagine in 1994 and 1995, when we wrote the book, how much angrier the public would become in the ensuing years. When we look at the broadest national canvass—American politics—it is practically impossible to find collaboration, civility, or a commitment to building consensus anywhere. Trust in institutions, other than the military, is lower than it has ever been and that includes negative attitudes toward the Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, banks and corporations. From outrage about healthcare reform, to packed public meetings opposing hydraulic fracturing, to conspiracy theories of Barak Obama as an African-pan-nationalist foreigner, or Bush and Cheney
engineering the World Trade Center collapse, citizens say, “We’re mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.”

Public anger can sometimes be constructive when it leads to a consensus on the need for change. But that has not happened. A recent Pew poll found attitudes about the environment, government, the social safety net, and many other issues have never been more polarized than they are today.

Why are we more divided than ever before? We believe there are three reasons: 1) distrust of science and expertise as a neutral foundation for policymaking has grown dramatically; 2) engagement with public and common activities has eroded; and 3) a deep economic and demographic anxiety has infected the country.

DISTRUST OF SCIENCE

Many people no longer perceive scientific expertise as a legitimate, neutral basis for decision making. Where once people though of science and scientists as central to our nation’s progress, now many think of “mainstream science” as just one more interest group. In fact it now seems like there are scientists lined up with interest groups on all sides of every controversial question, and some have explicitly joined the political fray. They surely have the right as citizens to do that, but the result has been to undermine the claim to neutrality and non-partisanship—not only of those individual scientists but, in the minds of many, all scientists.

This is especially true when it comes to the issue of climate change. Various national surveys, including Gallup’s 2008 Environment Poll, have looked at how many Americans believe that most scientists accept global warming as empirically established. Among Democrats, the percentage has increased since 1998 from 52 to 75 percent; among Republicans the increase was only from 42 to 54 percent—a difference of 21 percentage points! Instead of relying on the expertise of scientists, the public now channels what scientists are saying through a political filter. Science becomes no longer what we know, it is what we believe—or want to believe.

DECLINE OF PUBLIC SPACE

We believe that the trends identified by Robert Putnam in 2000 in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* have continued to accelerate. There are fewer and fewer physical places in American life where people of different socio-economic backgrounds are likely to get to know each other. The wealthy have retreated to gated communities, private home theaters, and private car services. We receive and communicate information in private, and every citizen can find a website, Facebook friend, or chat room that reinforces their particular views and prejudices, avoiding the uncomfortable opinions of others and feeding our outrage and frustration. We are not only bowling alone, we are blogging alone. We don't have to listen to people whose views and values are different from our own, and increasingly we don't know how.

ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC ANXIETY

Third, and perhaps most important, a rapidly changing economy and broad demographic shifts have triggered deep anxiety. Vast and rapidly moving global capital flows and sweeping technological change have left a new set of Americans with declining living standards and little hope of jumping on the technological superhighway. In addition, an aging population that lived through a period of expanding affluence now feels threatened by the growth of a younger, increasingly non-white population. Many Americans are deeply afraid things will continue to get worse; that they will fall further behind, and their children will be left with no way to make a comfortable life for themselves. In response they lash out at bankers, the government, immigrants, and corporations.

The public is angrier than ever. Do the principles we outlined more than 15 years ago still hold in this mad, mad world? Do we need to revise them? We stand by our six principles and believe, more than ever, that our basic ideas about the importance of acting in a trustworthy fashion, sharing information, and engaging in joint act finding and collaborative problem solving are essential. But we must expand the way they are used to address the rage that characterizes most public discourse today. That will be the subject of the next installment of this article. Stay tuned.

Read Part II of "Dealing with an Angrier Public" (/publication/article/2013/dealing-angrier-public-part-ii)