DELIVERING UNPOPULAR MESSAGES:
Don't just survive. Succeed!

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Introduction

We'd all like to deliver popular messages, the ones people want to hear, the positive and uncontroversial ones and those that evoke emotional responses like gratitude, pleasure and warmth. In a perfect world what other messages would there be to deliver? In that other sphere those that listen to messages would be well informed, rational, interested, motivated, knowledgeable and broad-minded. The fact that people, in this world, often don't display these characteristics is not an indictment against them. It isn't right, it isn't wrong; it is just that way. As someone who is going to deliver an unpopular message it is the recognition that some responses are predictable, unsurprising and not totally unjustified. As the deliverer of that message, you are challenging the beliefs, perceptions and opinions of someone. Most people are driven by a combination of beliefs that are largely ill formed, lack crucial information and can be irrational because of other circumstances. There is a lack of time, application of critical thinking and interest to sort through a complex situation, until the message deliverer holds up a mirror forcing people to face the issues. Who wouldn't be wracked with anxiety, anger or fear with that prospect?

 The process of holding up the mirror calmly, dispassionately and thoughtfully is the role of a message deliverer. The point of undertaking that action is not to inflame people, embarrass them or cause the demise of the message deliverer. It is to build capacity, with knowledge, to allow people to make a better, and more well informed decision about their future. Is the process painful to some? Yes, often to both message deliverers and listeners. Is there a less painful way to arrive at an end agreeable to both? Sometimes there is, and sometimes not; the pain is compensated for by the dividends, collected somewhere down the road, from a well-informed and motivated constituency that adopts and adapts to change. That change can benefit them and, remarkably, the rest of us as well.

How do we get there? The following is a thinking pathway to allow message deliverers the opportunity to anticipate and recognize responses, prepare messages and focus on message delivery:

1. What is the essence of an unpopular message?
2. What are some examples of unpopular messages?
3. How do people react to unpopular messages?
4. Why do people react negatively to unpopular messages?
5. What are the principle lessons we can learn from the reactions?

6. How can we improve the delivery of unpopular messages?
7. What can you do to make unpopular messages easier to deliver?
8. What is the goal of message delivery?

What is the essence of an unpopular message?

Consider why a message might be considered"unpopular". Why does the message create such consternation and conflict? Whether it is perception or reality, the message is an attack on what people do (and may have done for some time), how they do it and why they think it is the thing to do. The listener deduces they will be, or have been, affected in a negative way. Inevitably, the message is about change, from the familiar and the expected to the new and uncertain. That uncertainty conveys a message of loss. People may construe this as losing opportunity and access to resources or, losing flexibility and autonomy in decision-making. There may be a financial loss or, the expectation of an additional cost without a sense of return on the investment.

People would prefer not to hear such messages; as the messenger you bear the brunt of their reactions to the message. It may be cold comfort, but Machiavelli, the Renaissance era political philosopher, summed up the challenge of delivering unpopular messages this way:

"There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

What are some examples of unpopular messages (in the natural resource management field)?

Changes in access to resources:
-Decreases in stocking rates for grazing (AUM reductions)
-Changes in grazing management (timing, duration, sequencing)
-Costs for new management (fencing, water development, riding, salting)
-Increases for grazing fees, hunting and fishing licenses, campground costs
-Decreases or cessation of cost shared funds, incentive payments, subsidies

Changes in the rules:
-New regulations/legislation (e.g. Species at Risk Act)
-Increased enforcement of existing rules (e.g. Federal Fisheries Act)

Changes in allocation of resources:
-Access to public land; industrial, recreational (more or, restricted access)
-Instream flow needs (who gets the water?)
-Sale of public lands (who gets it; at what price?)
-Commercial/ sport fisheries (who gets the fish?)
-Catch and release angling, bag limit reductions, size limits

Issues over shared resources/landscapes:
-Weeds (spread, control, costs)
-Water quality (implications of decline on use, safety)
-Riparian/range health results
-Watershed status reports
-Recreation/ agriculture/ industry/urban conflicts
-Often anything related to conservation

How do people react to unpopular messages?

You can count on this; people will react to the message, some negatively. It is helpful to recognize the ways people attempt to neutralize a negative impact on themselves. By rationalizing their response, in some predictable ways, people seek to avoid their role in the situation. Anticipating these responses provides a way to create and present messages that help people see and accept their role.

1. Avoidance- Denial of responsibility, culpability and knowledge of the situation avoids acceptance or the need for the change. Some stock responses include: "it's not my fault" (it was flooding, drought, beavers, elk, gophers, BSE, markets, late spring/early winter, early spring/ late winter…..that caused the problem); "I'm only doing what everyone else is doing"; ""it's always been done this way/ it's the only way it can be done"; "that won't work here"; "I didn't know/see/realize"; "no one else here cares".

2. Rebalancing- this is the metaphor of the ledger where all the good qualities and actions are used to outweigh the wrongs or the negatives. There can be a tendency to go widely and wildly beyond the scope of the issue being addressed to seek some kind of redress. Some examples include: "most of the place looks good, there's only a few hot spots"; "I didn't graze another pasture at all this year"; "I've been to a grazing course, but I haven't got around to doing anything yet".

3. Necessity- The compelling defense of survival; the actions are justified based on economic necessity. "I need to do it this way to make a living/ to feed and educate my children"; "my banker tells me I have to do this"; "that would be wasting grass by not using it".

4. Dismiss the messenger- Effectively changing or deflecting the focus from the actions of the audience to the characteristics of the messenger, the message or the source of the message. This can include condemning and demonizing the message source, the science, the data collection and hence the need for any change or deviation from the status quo. Some of the responses might include: "You are an outsider/you don't live here/you don't know anything about this area/you don't farm, ranch, fish, hunt…."; "you scientists are impractical/don't have your feet on the ground"; "the data is wrong/you didn't collect enough information/you collected it wrong/ the method doesn't work here/ the analysis is biased"; "you've just got it in for us poor folks".

Why do people react negatively to unpopular messages?

Any message has the potential to be deemed unpopular if it is new, requires change, hasn't had a positive buildup and comes from an unknown or suspect source. No list can be exhaustive on this subject but some common responses include the following:

1. Frustration could be at the root of the response. Change is happening too quickly, with little or no warning and little opportunity has been provided to understand, adjust and accept it.

2. Anxiety can mount when there is little explanation or information available to aid people in sorting out how the change may affect them.

3. Misconceptions, partial truths, exaggerations (sometimes willful ones) and false expectations about the message and its impact can add to anxiety.

4. Pressure can escalate in people's minds when there is a sense of many changes, additional threats to the status quo and uncertainty surrounding these, whether they are connected or not.

5. There may be fear related to prosecution, loss of income and opportunity or the loss of flexibility and autonomy.

6. Fear can translate into anger. Anger is expressed because the message may represent a threat, an accusation, a challenge, it may be embarrassing, a loss of control or show a lack of respect for the individual or others in the community.

7. The source of the message has little credibility and there is a lack of trust in the messenger(s).

8. Any message may be greeted by disbelief, skepticism and denial if there is any level of uncertainty about the need for change.

What are the principle lessons we can learn from the reactions?

People will continue to view messages as negative and unpopular if there isn't an attempt to break (or interrupt) the cycle causing a negative reaction to messages.
We need to consider these principle lessons:

1. Think strategically about the trends in and drivers of policy; it may be difficult to anticipate what the changes are, but not that there will be changes. Determine how the communities you interact with can be prepared for change to remove the element of surprise.

2. We have not yet achieved full ecological literacy (fundamental understanding of the processes that underpin natural systems) in most audiences that allows them to appreciate the issues and the link to their actions.

3. Communication isn't just informing people to gain acceptance of a message, it is also about involving them in the decisions that affect them. People need access to timely, accurate information. Communication is not a "one time" event, it is an ongoing effort to engage and interact with people.

4. People fight for respect and recognition just as much as for their "real" interests. When emotions run high there needs to be acknowledgement and validation of those feelings. Anticipate, plan for and organize information and responses to deal with fear, anger, change or uncertainty.

5. There is a lack of information and knowledge about how resources are inventoried and monitored, how the need for regulatory or policy changes is determined and, what the anticipated effect of change will be on the resource.

6. Trust and credibility are key features to the acceptance of unpopular messages. Achieving those credentials is a function of building positive relationships within the community.

7. The timelines of a community are not the same timelines as an agency.

How can we improve the delivery of unpopular messages?

How people respond to information and the implications to them depends largely on three things; the messenger, the message and the message source. Sometimes a message is deemed "unpopular" because of systemic issues at its source, the agency, organization or group responsible for the message and the changes it embodies. The "we" in the title relates to what institutions and agencies should consider doing to aid both message deliverers and themselves to gain better acceptance of messages.

1. The process of education needs to begin before a prescription for change is promoted. Planning for communication includes starting early, so the messenger's role is proactive, not reactive and defensive. Communication is not a part time, "add on" job, so budgets for resources and time and, appropriate job descriptions are important.

2. Provide the tools, training, opportunities and incentives to allow staff to develop good communication skills.

3. Improve the transparency of management decisions by being clear on the scientific criteria (inventory and monitoring methods), the process of regulatory or policy decision making and the timelines for all the steps.

4. Include resource users (and other affected parties) in the development of new strategies and find ways for their experience, knowledge and wisdom to be reflected in the management policy.

5. Recognize that management is a"people" issue. Build the opportunities for relationships to be forged with resource users; this takes time and staff continuity. As a "people" issue there is a responsibility to select people with the appropriate aptitudes and attitudes to represent an organization or agency in the delivery of sensitive messages.

6. Developing internal policies to ensure the delivery of consistent messages will overcome the tendency for often conflicting messages to be heard from various levels in the organization. Part of this is better internal communication, at all levels, to ensure people know what the consistent messages are and are able to communicate them both internally and externally.

What can I do to make unpopular messages easier to deliver?

The previous section was on institutional preparedness, what they can do to make your job of messenger easier. This section is about what you, as the messenger, should consider doing to prepare yourself for the tasks ahead.

1. Take some time, do some homework and gather some intelligence about the community with which you want to (or will have to) engage. The history of the community, the activities it undertakes, the networks/networking and the people of influence within (and outside) the community will provide critical information to develop contacts to begin networking and creating linkages. The linkages can be both with individuals and with organizations active within the community (e.g. Municipal/rural district level, forage associations, beef clubs, tillage societies and watershed groups).

2. Start early and small on some positive and less contentious subjects. The benefits are twofold. First, it is an opportunity to start building capacity in a community that will enable them to understand the issue(s), the inventory and monitoring methods, gain acceptance of the results and see the possibility for change in a positive and voluntary light. Second, it is your chance to start building a relationship with people to enhance trust and credibility, the two features that will figure prominently when you deliver an unpopular message to them.

3. Develop your skill set to deliver messages. Start first by increasing your technical knowledge and your proficiency on the subjects with which you are most familiar.

Add some networking skills to broaden your subject matter and familiarity with areas outside of your experience. Those networks will enable you to seek assistance, will provide new perspectives, add material to your repertoire and offer timely feedback. Build and enhance your communication skills with courses, workshops and practice, especially presentations. Work also on writing and listening proficiency, both of which are crucial for communication.

4. Exercise patience and persistence in community-based work. Develop a long-term vision for your actions and an ability to convince your agency on the merits of that approach. Reflect on and understand what you are delivering (or selling); consider how the change, the project or the latest funding supports a legacy of responsible resource stewardship.

5. Consider how messages should be conveyed. Plan their delivery with the community, especially selecting appropriate dates and venues. Consider the format of other community events, especially the convention of eating together as a social function. Determine, through interaction with the community, the format for communication (e.g. direct presentation, information session, drop in/open house, panel discussion, workshop, and field trip).

6. Build your message based on an understanding of the audience and how they might react. Return them to the basics, to ecological principles and processes, to build a case for the message. Show what is in the realm of the possible for them; what benefits are immediate and which are long term. Explain the implications of not making a change, in terms meaningful to them. Your role is to educate and not to provoke anything but thought.

7. Undertake a "missile" test of your message on a friendly audience. Listen to the feedback, determine the weaknesses in the argument, ask what the likely questions will be and use this material to strengthen the presentation and to prepare for debate.

8. Develop some "rules of engagement". Know your alternatives, the latitude you can exercise and the freedom for deviation from the script ahead of time. Set the stage by stating emphatically what you can and can't talk about. This narrows the scope to limit debate to those items you can discuss or feel confident about discussing. Define your role (e.g. umpire/referee, technical expert, policy writer, banker, information broker….).

9. Understand that every action makes an impression. Show genuine friendliness and concern; put yourself in the audiences' shoes. People appreciate straight talk; don't dance around the subject. Maintain an attitude of fairness. If you can soften the blow with something positive it can be a bridge-building opportunity. Provide the gesture of being in this together, but confer ownership and responsibility for action to them. Listen to people; focus on what they need and not on what they demand. Bring possible solutions based on examples with which the audience can

relate. Point out where you can agree but be honest about those things where agreement isn't possible. You don't have to be tough, just principled. Don't reciprocate anger and don't take it personally.

10. Distinguish between situations where you have time to prepare, condition the audience, and increase your credibility and those occasions where you are forced into a reactive stance, due to circumstances beyond your control. In some forums or situations you can't win, your goal is survival. Inevitably, you should use every opportunity to take people back to the principles, the basics or the fundamentals to educate as you explain (e.g. carrying capacity, soil erosion, landscape health, dynamic equilibrium). Look for opportunities, even under trying conditions, to create bridges between them and you and, to create value for them if they considered the message (e.g. economics, reduced regulatory impact, stewardship, sustainability, resilience). Meet anger with reason, fear with enlightenment and uncertainty with a vision for the future.

What is the final goal of message delivery (unpopular or otherwise)?

Messages (and how they are delivered) should pare away at the complexity, present risk and uncertainty clearly, deal with anger through reason and allow the development of a thinking pathway that shows clear consequences (both positive and negative) of choices and actions. The creation of a literate constituency of people that understand, interact and support the goals of resource stewardship benefits all of us. Neither science, the marketplace nor regulations will alone cure the issues facing us. To accomplish that will require the creation of greater ecological literacy in a constituency that understands, cares and makes more enlightened decisions. The goal will only be reached with consistent, rigorous and prolonged delivery of messages that at least initially might be seen as "unpopular". The unpopular message of today may become the popular one of tomorrow.

Suggested reading:

Canadian Petroleum Association. 1989. Public consultation guidelines for the Canadian Petroleum Industry. Calgary, Alberta. 96p.

De Bono, Edward. 1985. Six Thinking Hats. Penguin Books. 209p.

Fazio, J.R. and D.L. Gilbert. 1981. Public Relations and Communications for Natural Resource Managers. Kendal/Hunt Publishing. 375p.

Fisher, R. and W. Ury. 1981. Getting to Yes: Negotiating without giving in. Penguin Books. 161p.

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February 2006