Note: These "Look Inside" pages are discontinuous.

CONFLICT, MEETINGS, and DIFFICULT PEOPLE

The Essential Guide for Members of California's Public Boards, Town Councils, Commissions, Agency Staff and Neighborhood Associations

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FOREWORD

This guide contains tools to manage conflict, meetings and difficult people. The tools come from almost two thousand commissioners, public board members, town council members and public officials attending University of California Extension workshops, and from my thirty years of working with managers in the public and private sector, building teams and organizations with great trust, cooperation and satisfaction.

Members of boards, commissions, town councils and agency staff across California (and nationally) struggle with managing conflict and participation—particularly in public meetings, which are often messy and frustrating.

Most civic leaders experience this frustration. If you bring some of the tools in this guide to your fellow board, council, or commission members, they might thank you. Your meetings will be more effective—and you'll be happier.

Some ideas and tools in this guide will fit your beliefs as well as your city, town, county or region; others will seem outlandish. Use what feels right.

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The commission recognized that it was a perfect stage for battle. No wonder conflict was a serious problem. They brought it on themselves. If you used that process at home you'd land in a divorce court, yet they used it making community decisions. **If you use an adversarial process, expect conflict. It's as simple as that.**

It was several months before that insight sank in, even longer before they made conflict-reducing changes.

Rearrange the Room

They started by physically reorganizing their public meeting room *(Page 74)*. They bought five high chairs, like bar stools with backs, putting them to the side of the town council chamber dais. There were several large TV screens on the walls behind and to one side of the dais. Now they had a triangle, with the public facing the screens and the commission to the side, facing the public and the screens.

In a traditional layout, the public focuses on the commission, trying to convince them by arguing for or against particular positions. The new arrangement focused public attention on the screens, which the commission used to manage information, discussions and decisions.

The town's maintenance department built the commission a small extension to the town council dais. It is a bench-like table for papers and laptops—essential for managing discussions. There is no front panel, just as there is none in front of the public. The no-panel signals, "We are open."

After changing the seating, the commission changed their decision process.

Managing Conflict in Decisions

Previously, the commission used the traditional argumentative public process, and then voted. That left some unhappy people who later undermined decisions. It was frustrating, inefficient and divisive, working against good community. But everyone was used to it and saw no alternative—until Moose Ormsby pulled another jewel from his UC class handbook, the *4-Step Decision Process (Page 46)*.

Claire suggests, first realize that what people do depends on their situation. Everyone behaves appropriately—from their own point of view. So manage your situation to make cooperation appropriate while minimizing conflict *(Page 16)*.

Start at home. Build an open, trusting team of commissioners, board members or town council. Get to know each other. Discuss managing yourselves. Agree on what values you'd like to show as you work, and what that means in practice. Get legal approval for such special discussions.

Claire's commissioners have two goals: first, to deal efficiently and fairly with the substantive issues coming before them, e.g., the permits and plans; and second, contributing to a stronger community by the values they show in the way they do these things.

When discussing values, the commission concluded that most people want to contribute, be appreciated, and feel valuable and constructive. People enjoy working in groups with good relations, trust, openness, and teamwork. We each appreciate recognition, as well as going home knowing we did a good job. There's also the golden rule: Treat others the way you like being treated. And listen more than you talk. It's that old saying, "We have two ears and one mouth."

Good commission leadership is as much how you do things as what you do *(Page 39)*. How you act shows your values. Ask your commissioners, board, or council what values they'd like to see shown by their community leaders. The Sierra Meadows commissioners wrote down the values they each wanted. They still follow that list.

Claire mentions values at every planning commission meeting. It's one reason people trust the commission. They know the commissioners are trying to do the right thing for Sierra Meadows. They see that their town's in good hands.

Think about your public meetings as the stage where you play out your commissioner roles and the public plays out theirs. That stage largely controls what everyone does. Claire's commission shifted that stage from conflict to cooperation. So can you.

MANAGING THE CONFLICT SITUATION

We each respond appropriately to our situation—from our own point of view. Our behavior is therefore information about our situation.

If there is conflict in a meeting, examine the meeting's structure and process. This is the part that you as commissioners have control over and can change.

- Don't focus on the person as if they are the problem.
- Don't look at the problem as if it is an event independent of its situation.

People in similar situations behave similarly because they share a common sense of what is appropriate. In meetings, we each know what is appropriate and how we should act.

SITUATION
Manageable

PERSONALITY
Not Manageable

BEHAVIOR
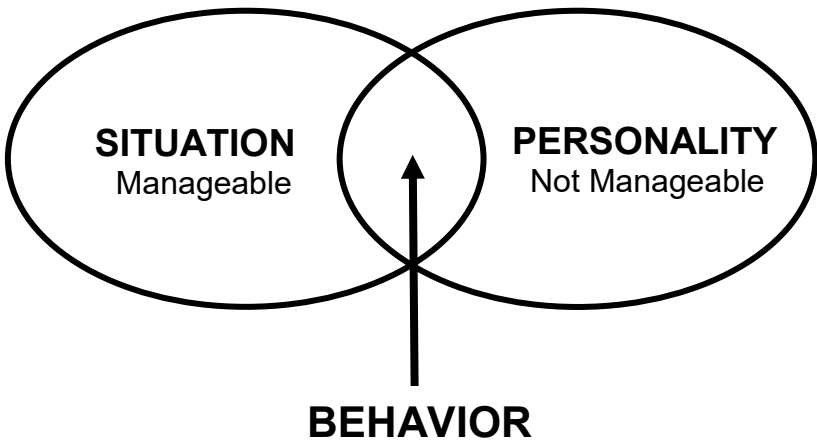
Personality plays a role in what happens, but as a commissioner you can't change someone's personality—and you probably shouldn't try. **If people are arguing, it is because the situation tells them that arguing is appropriate.**

To reduce conflict, make arguing and conflict less appropriate. Look at yourselves, your processes and your meetings. Ask, "How can we as commissioners create a situation that reduces conflict and encourages cooperation?"

BALANCING THE COMMISSION MEETING CULTURE

Your commission meeting is a working culture. All cultures have two parts, the operational and the human. The key to productive commission meetings, with minimal conflict and effective outcomes, is balancing these two halves, balancing **what** you do with **how** you do it *(Page 17)*.

The bottom or operational half contains the meat, the plans, the applications, decisions, laws, procedures, etc. The top or human half contains how you do your business—particularly the values you show, such as openness, trust, involvement, listening, empathy and respect.

Commissions spend most time on the operational half. But too many largely ignore the top half. The result might be efficiency, but not community satisfaction and trust.
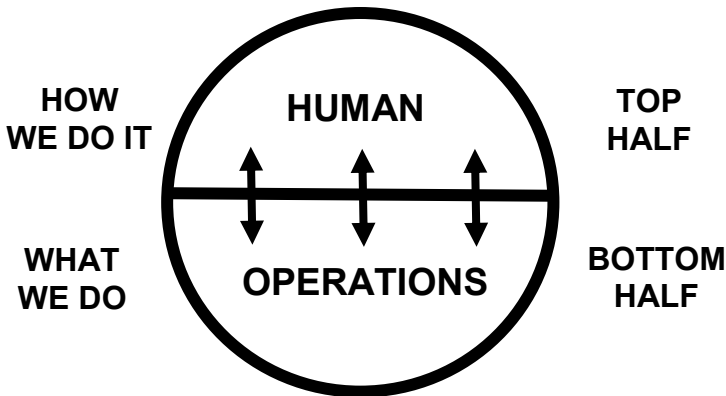
THE BALANCED WORK CULTURE

People's attitudes are more affected by **how** things are done than by **what** is done. Most of **what** commissioners do comes from outside their control: from applicants, staff, regulations and laws. In contrast, commissioners can mostly control **how** they do things.

People usually accept decisions if they are involved in them. If people don't feel involved, they may resist.

4-STEP DECISION PROCESS

1
Situation?
What is the
Issue or
Problem?

2
Possibilities?
What are the
Alternatives?

Action?
What will
we do?

4

Criteria?
How should
we choose?

3
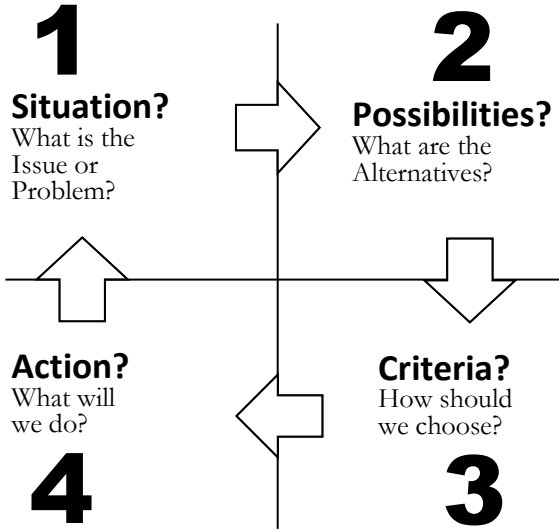
4-Step Decision Process

Questions:

Do your commission and your staff usually follow a similar process of problem solving?

Yes _____ No _____

If they did follow such a procedure, would it speed meetings, simplify the analysis of problems, and better organize the presentation of materials?

Yes _____ No _____

See page 101 for another version of this decision process that you could also use at public meetings.

Honestly Describe the Situation

Step 1 of the 4-Step Decision Process *(Page 46)* asks, "What is the situation?" If you and your commission value transparency and honesty, do you really describe the full situation if you omit "political" information?

Claire Conner's (fictional) Sierra Meadows Planning Commission *(Page 1)* asked themselves, "Should we side with the traditional 'argue-to-win' cultural norm, where concealment, obfuscation and denial are optimal strategies—or should we adopt 'argue-to-learn', requiring honesty, openness and transparency?"

It takes money to run for public office. At the average town or county level it costs hundreds to thousands of dollars. A state-level campaign costs several million dollars. Even if some candidates fill much of their war chest with small individual contributions, almost all accept large donations from individuals, interest groups, corporations and PACs.

There is no sin in accepting money to get elected. It's the American way. The problem comes when elected officials pretend they are not influenced by these contributions. Contributors would need a lobotomy to separate their contribution from an anticipated benefit. Money, ideology and influence go hand-in-hand. Should you openly acknowledge that in your commission's decision process?

The first step in the 4-Step Decision Process is, "What's the situation? What's the problem?" With some issues, part of that situation is what's represented by a financial contribution and its related ideology. Politics is as important as (maybe more so than?) "scientific data" on environmental, traffic, or school impacts. It's nothing to be coy about. Political influence needs no more defensiveness or emphasis than a traffic study.

How legitimate is a description of the situation if it excludes a significant item? Attempts to be this objective may rattle some cultural norms. People may object that you shouldn't talk publicly about money and politics. They may

COMMISSION SUMMARY REPORT

On all major issues coming before the commission, the staff analysis should include a one-page Summary Report.

At commission meetings, this summary is valuable public information. Be sure to have enough copies for everyone. It complements the *Commission Public-Information Pamphlet (Page 54)*. Together they form the foundation for managing public discussion *(Page 77)*. The report gives the following information listed as a series of one-liners:

A. **Project identification** information, including names of applicants.

———————————————————————————

B. The **problem** or request as first presented, plus all the **key issues** or problems later identified. "What is the problem/issue/situation?" (Decision Process Step 1, *Page 46*.)

———————————————————————————

C. The major **alternatives** or possibilities. "What could we do?" (Step 2.)

———————————————————————————

D. The major **criteria** to help rank or choose between alternatives. "How should we choose?" (Step 3.)

———————————————————————————

E. The **staff recommendation** (if any). (Part of Step 4.)

———————————————————————————

F. The **options** available to the commission or board, e.g.:
  • **Approve.**
  • Approve with **modifications.**
  • **Disapprove** or deny.
  • **Put over** until a following meeting.
  • **Refer** to another commission or to council.

IMPROVE YOUR MEETINGS WITH CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Having the public attend, then evaluate your meetings, gives you valuable feedback on your performance as a commission, board or council. When you use their suggestions, it tells citizens you value what they think, and that you are trying to do the right thing by them.

Written Evaluation

Leave a short evaluation form by the door. You could pass it out to everybody at the meeting. At the end of the meeting, and perhaps also during the meeting, ask attendees to complete the form and leave it in the labeled box. It is yours. Ask what you want to know. As your needs change, update the form. Here are some ideas:

Public Participation
Did you speak at today's meeting?   No ☐   Yes ☐
If yes, did the (name of your Commission) listen to and hear you?
No ☐   Not Sure ☐   Yes ☐

Decisions
Were you satisfied with the decision process used today?
No ☐   Not Sure ☐   Yes ☐
Were you satisfied with the final decision or outcome on your issue today?
No ☐   Not Sure ☐   Yes ☐

Comment or Suggestion:

_____

_____

Verbal Evaluation

At the end of the meeting, do a public "plus-delta". Use two columns. At the top of the left column, put **+** (plus). At the top of the right column, draw a triangle Δ (delta). Explain, *"The plus is what you liked about this meeting—things we should keep for next time.*

MANAGING THE EMOTIONAL SETTING

Set a physical and psychological stage that reduces conflict and hostility. Most people come to public meetings to support or oppose something. When they see you as an ally, inviting their participation and hearing what they say, they will be more trusting, and less inclined to flag-waving, posing and opposing.

The **emotional picture** to create for your commission meeting is a place where people feel welcomed and heard. Imagine a comfortable situation where you're enjoying a conversation: maybe sitting together on a sofa, or seated on either side of a small, round café table, or chatting by a water-cooler.

The physical layout of a commission meeting room encourages—or discourages—dialog, participation and consensus building. Many commissions meet in the town council chambers, using the slightly raised dais, curved table and microphones. However, if the dais is too high, forcing citizens to look uncomfortably up at the commissioners, it discourages equality and good relationships.

As Claire Conner described *(Page 6)*, the Sierra Meadows Planning Commission set up a triangle, where public and commission focused on the overhead TV screen, rather than facing (confronting) each other.

Large meetings. Large cities and counties, or powerful state or regional commissions, can create a more participatory environment with a gently sloping floor, where the public looks down at the elected or appointed officials. That helps balance the inordinate power that appointed and elected officials present by sitting as a group, on the other side of a high wall—with all the trappings of authority and control including flags and insignia—a traditional physical arrangement encouraging compliance, but also resentment and hostility.

Increase Participation. If you truly want participation (and who these days thinks they can run government any other way?) you will state this very clearly by HOW you run

WORDS THAT WORK—BEYOND NIMBY

NIMBY means **N**ot **I**n **M**y **B**ack **Y**ard, a common public response to generalized fears that a proposed project will bring undesirable elements (people, activities, business, traffic...) or depress property values. The 4-Step Decision Process *(Page 46)* helps people clarify their often-vague fears, and it eases their concerns that they are not being heard.

Reduce Conflict—Bring Order to Chaos

Public participation is messy, often confusing. For many attendees, this will be their first commission meeting. Many came because they have questions and concerns, often vague and general. It is the board or commission's responsibility to help everyone understand the range of concerns as well as the specific issues, and then to answer questions. For a legitimate decision process, all affected parties should be present.

Many attendee questions will be answered by the *Commission Summary Report (Page 55)* and the *Commission Public-Information Pamphlet (Page 54)*.

The commission member (usually the chair) opens the public input with Step 1 of the 4-Step Decision Process *(Page 46)*.

Who is Here?

"Thank you all for coming this evening. We will begin by understanding the range of issues and concerns present in the room. I'd like to know why you came today, by asking you four questions.

"The first question will be, "Who is here to generally support the proposal (issue, topic, plan, project, study, etc.)?" The second is, "Who is here to generally oppose the project?" The third will be, "Who is here to support the proposal if it is modified in some way?" The fourth is, "Who came just to get information about the issue?" Your answers are not a vote on the project. They will tell us who is in the room, so that we can have a more-informed discussion and meeting.

For and Against?

ARGUE TO WIN OR ARGUE TO LEARN?

Our fictional Sierra Meadows Planning Commission struggled internally with this question. Here is their thinking.

In a battle, your best strategy is withholding information and concealing your position. That's usual in a traditional adversarial public hearing processes—but are those good community values?

This commission believes that it shows real strength when it is open, truthful, understanding and empathetic to the wide range of personalities, values and interests in their community.

People who like fighting may call openness "weakness," but fighting contributes to the polarization and alienation we all experience today. As a commission, they didn't want to support that. They felt they could do better, as Sierra Meadows is their home, where their families live.

They quickly discovered that people who argue to win, who are closed and defensive, used the commission's openness to attack. The commission realized that people who like fights live in a stark, black-and-white, yes-and-no, right-and-wrong "zero-sum" world, where civil wars have one winner and one destroyed loser. These people use openness to hit commissioners hard.

The commissioners have been accused of being naïve, or wishy-washy, or both. For example, if one is personally attacked in a meeting and summarizes the attack on the overhead screen during Step 1 of the decision process *(Page 9),* they appear, to some, like a wuss. *"Why don't you shout back, 'That's a load of crap—and it's irrelevant!'"*

If they are attacked at public meetings they don't cave. They stand calm and still, not pushing, but not falling back. The public then sees that the commission is honest, open and transparent, doing the right things and doing them right. This brings powerful community trust and support.

About the Author—Barry Phegan

For thirty years Barry Phegan was managing partner of Meridian Group, a Berkeley, California consulting company specializing in company culture. His book *Developing Your Company Culture* is available through Amazon.

He taught various professional management-related classes throughout the University of California, University Extension. This guide grew from some of those classes.

In addition to his earlier career as an architect in Australia, Sweden and Canada, he worked in the USA as a planner, as a manager in local government, and as a member of a city planning commission. He led many public meetings during the contentious times of the civil rights era when violence and handguns made some meetings scary.

Barry Phegan has an architecture degree from the University of Sydney, Australia; a Master of Architecture and Urban Design from Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri; and a PhD in City and Regional Planning from the University of California, Berkeley, where he also studied management.

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