

REACHING OUT TO INTERESTED PARTIES: NEW APPROACHES FOR A NATIONAL LABORATORY

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ABSTRACT: Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) is a multi-disciplinary research facility that experienced several environmental incidents, resulting in an immediate and intense reaction from community members, activist groups, elected officials and regulators. A new management firm with a strong commitment to environmental stewardship, open communication, and cultural change, assumed management of BNL in March 1998, and immediately began to develop an ISO 14001 Environmental Management System that emphasized community outreach. This paper describes how BSA reengineered their external communications program to regain the trust of their stakeholders. The underlying goal was to "*inform and involve.*" A Community Involvement Plan was developed to solicit input from interested parties and use it in Laboratory decision-making processes. A Community Advisory Committee was formed to provide direct input to the Laboratory Director. A formal channel for two-way communication with elected officials and regulators was created. Finally, BNL utilized a previously untapped yet invaluable resource to reach out to the community: their employees.

BACKGROUND: Brookhaven National Laboratory (BNL) is a U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) multi-disciplinary research facility located in a suburban area of New York, USA. Several incidents that occurred in the late 1990's, including on and offsite chemical and radioactive groundwater contamination, revealed significant environmental management concerns at this site. The reaction from community members, activist groups, elected officials and DOE was immediate and intense. In an unprecedented move, DOE terminated the contractor operating the Laboratory. The new management contractor, Brookhaven Science Associates (BSA), won the contract in part because of their commitment to environmental stewardship and open communication, and because of their proposed use of a proven methodology for cultural change. Historically, BNL had communicated effluent and emission concentrations, compliance status, and progress on its environmental improvement programs via all legally required channels. Starting immediately in March 1998, BNL sought new and innovative ways to communicate with interested parties on environmental issues. They utilized the principles of the ISO 14001 communication requirements to emphasize community outreach.

Traditional methods of communicating with regulators, elected officials and community members were characterized by formalized systems structured to satisfy legal and other requirements. At prescribed frequencies, written technical reports detailing effluent and emission concentrations were submitted to the appropriate state agency to satisfy regulatory permit requirements. Formal public meetings were held to seek public opinion on topics such as environmental restoration strategies or impacts of proposals for new operations as required by the CERCLA and NEPA regulations. On an annual basis, BNL published a report detailing the results of a comprehensive environmental monitoring network that typically included over 5,000 samples of air, drinking water, surface water, groundwater, soil, flora and fauna collected from hundreds of locations on site, as required by DOE procedure. The goal of the environmental monitoring program is to assess environmental quality, verify compliance with regulatory and permit conditions, and provide early detection of conditions requiring corrective actions. The monitoring data were interpreted, and comparisons to historical trends as well as regulatory limits were provided. Over 500 interested parties routinely received copies of these annual reports. These methods alone, however, did not satisfy the community's desire to understand the environmental impact of activities conducted at the Laboratory

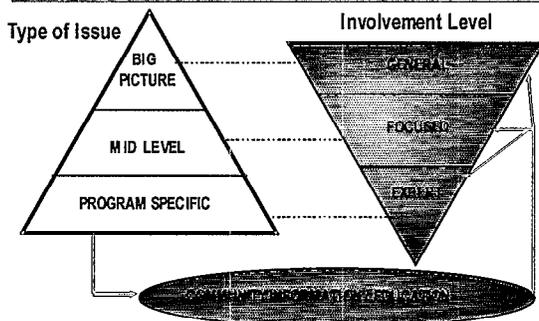
and were not sufficient to rebuild their trust in BNL's ability to control operations and prevent harm to the environment, employees, and their neighbors.

APPROACH: Consistent with ISO 14001 requirements to "...consider processes for external communication on its significant environmental aspects...", the Laboratory investigated external communication channels that could effectively capture the concerns and recommendations of community members. BNL formed a "focus group" consisting of representatives from the community, local special interest groups, business community, Laboratory retirees and managers, and the DOE. Through in-depth roundtable discussions, these interested parties provided insight and input on how Brookhaven should involve the community in decision-making processes. These recommendations were formalized in a Community Involvement Plan¹. The underlying philosophy of this program is:

- People have a fundamental desire to participate in decisions that affect their lives.
- Decisions that involve the full range of people impacted are much more likely to achieve broad-based support and long-term success.
- Many minds, working together from a range of perspectives, can often come up with a better solution for any problem.
- Community Involvement allows the people in the community to hold the decision makers accountable for hearing their concerns and carefully considering them – one way or the other – in the decision making process.

BNL realized that it was important to provide accurate, complete and clear information to stakeholders. The information also had to be timely and accessible (e.g., available on the web). In addition, they needed to demonstrate their willingness to talk about both good news and bad. They kept communication channels open, communicating early and often, and followed-up on community concerns. Finally, they provided the information in a way that was understandable (user-friendly), gearing the technical level to the audience, avoiding jargon, presenting information within context, and including more photographs and visual displays of data.

FIGURE 1 - DECISION-MAKING HIERARCHY



Another critical factor in building trust is delivering on commitments. BNL Senior Managers established a prioritized program for upgrades and improvements in key environmental program areas. All levels of BNL management were assigned specific responsibilities for supporting the Laboratory-wide environmental improvement projects.

A Decision-Making Hierarchy (Figure 1) was established to define a system for involving the community. First, issues for which decisions were being considered were categorized as either "Big Picture" (ie., policy level decisions), "Mid-Level" (ie., technical-based decision), or "Program Specific" (ie, in-depth technical-based decision related to a particular program). Second, the level of involvement had to be commensurate with the decision and the skill and knowledge needed to make a decision. For example, "General" involvement of a broad, cross-section of the community is sought for "Big Picture" decisions. In contrast, involvement by a "Focused" group (those having a working understanding of the Laboratory, its operations, and the issue under review) is sought on "Mid-Level" decisions. Lastly, "Experts", by virtue of their background, interest, or profession who are sufficiently well versed to understand and comment on technical details, are involved in "Program Specific" decisions. Providing a balanced foundation of information and understanding on

¹ Community Involvement Plan; Brookhaven National Laboratory - Community Involvement, Government and Public Affairs Directorate; Technical Document BNL-52562; April 15, 1999.

the issues is an important component for effective community involvement at all levels, and is a responsibility of all parties involved. In support of this responsibility, BNL provides access to relevant reports, records and documents as well as non-technical explanations on technical matters as requested by the community members.

Translating this plan into action required several new initiatives to create appropriate channels and forums for external interested parties to participate in Laboratory decision-making processes. Mechanisms used to disseminate information and solicit feedback on "Big Picture" issues included newsletters, surveys, mailing lists and the World Wide Web. Existing community groups or community meetings were also utilized to discuss issues and seek recommendations. "Mid-level" and "Program Specific" issues require community members to have a greater depth of knowledge and be available to commit the necessary time and energy to conduct in-depth investigations. A Community Advisory Committee was formed consisting of representatives from 32 groups with diverse perspectives, including civic, business, union, health, education and environmental groups. This independent committee can bring issues of interest to the attention of the Laboratory, participate in focused involvement groups or serve as experts in specialized study groups, and provide direct input to the Laboratory Director. To facilitate two-way communication with elected officials and regulators, DOE created the Brookhaven Executive Roundtable. Both the Community Advisory Committee and this roundtable provide forums for updating members and the public on environmental issues such as progress on improvement projects, unexpected releases or incidents, and other topics of interest to these groups. Focus groups on particular issues, such as the effects of low level radiation, were also used to encourage a dialogue and get feedback on programs or documents while still under development thus allowing maximum input from interested parties. Another example of how BNL institutionalized the principles of open and timely communication was the development of the BNL Ground Water Contingency Plan. Upon discovery of elevated groundwater concentrations, BNL established a formal response procedure that includes verifying analytical results, establishing time frames and limits for informing stakeholders, producing fact sheets and presentations for communicating information to the public, and following-up with stakeholders to inform them of progress and any new information as it becomes available.

Finally, BNL utilized a previously untapped yet invaluable resource to reach out to the community: their employees. Through face-to-face contacts, employees developed relationships with key opinion leaders in the community and provided new channels for information to flow in and out of the Laboratory. More than 75% of the Laboratory's 3000 employees live within a 15-mile radius of the lab. Many are involved in local community and civic groups. They have the same concerns as their neighbors about environmental issues, but can share their knowledge to foster a better understanding of the Laboratory. Contrary to the above-mentioned community involvement structure, these activities are not issue- or decision-related. Some employees participate in the Speakers Bureau Program and make presentations to civic group meetings upon request. Others volunteer in the schools and perform science presentations. Still others participate in the Envoy Program and simply act as a conduit for requests for information by community group to the Laboratory. The goals of these efforts are primarily to share information and build personal relationships within the community.

RESULTS: The forums developed to encourage community involvement on important environmental issues have shown some initial success. Consensus opinions of the Community Advisory Community have affected the implementation strategy on environmental restoration projects. This group has invested the time and effort needed to be valued contributors on tough technical issues facing Laboratory management. A specialized focus group concerned with the adequacy of public comment on a major construction project expressed their concerns and persuaded the Laboratory to coordinate additional venues for such input. Formal systems for receiving and responding to requests for information and systems for providing feedback on community involvement efforts have been established. Informal mechanisms for communicating with the public have implemented at the grassroots level and initial

results indicate that both the employees and community members are supportive of this mode of communication. ISO 14001 external communications requirements not only have provided BNL the needed framework to establish its communications processes, but also the necessary flexibility to customize those processes to meet the expressed needs of its interested parties.

SUMMARY: Regulatory required external communications still continue at Brookhaven. However, new external communication channels for proactively seeking input from a wide array of interested parties have been established. Mechanisms to inform and educate the public have been expanded and utilize a variety of media to maximize exposure. A framework for involving the community in the decision making process has been implemented and has started to register positive results. As BNL continues to deliver on its commitments and demonstrates improvement to their programs and performance, they hope to regain the trust of their community members, regulators and elected officials. A holistic external communication program such as this has enabled Brookhaven National Laboratory to begin a journey of establishing itself as a world class leader in the environmental arena equal to its world class status in the sciences.

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