

Ask Questions Well and You May Even Receive Worthwhile Answers!

by Elaine Cogan

Most planning commissioners are inundated with reports, memoranda, and other forms of written information. For many of us, reading through piles of documents is not the most effective way to gain and retain information. We learn best by talking to people and exchanging ideas — among commissioners, between commissioners and staff, and with the public.

However, our ability to benefit from verbal interchange can be impaired severely if we do not listen with an open and receptive attitude.

Do you automatically assume that faulty actions equal disreputable motives? Before you hear all sides, do you automatically assume that the developer is motivated only by greed when cutting down an ancient tree? That the merchant knowingly disobeys the city's sign ordinance when erecting a sign two inches above the limit? A "guilty before proven" attitude can put you at a disadvantage. By impugning someone's integrity without a fair discussion, you confer a mantle of victimhood that may bring you unexpected enemies.

Does your body language reveal that you are unreceptive to other points of view? There are many non-verbal ways you can give yourself away. Planning commissioners are known to lean way back in their chairs, fold their arms, roll their eyes, or tap impatiently on the table. Some even close their eyes in feigned or real boredom. Any "nice" words they say are belied by such behavior — which people can translate easily — creating animosity toward you and your colleagues.

Do you state all your opinions so strongly that you appear to be daring someone to offer rebuttal? If you throw down the gauntlet each time you give your opinion, you escalate the rhetoric and force people to counter with theirs. You gain an advantage

if you use a conciliatory tone of voice, starting off with words such as, "It seems to me," or "As I look at the situation." There may be times you feel you have to express your position in unequivocal terms, but those should be rare. In most situations, there is truth and right on both sides. If you are noted for your willingness to be conciliatory, people will listen and take notice when you do feel strongly or uncompromisingly about something.

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Is your tone sarcastic or angry? Most perpetrators of this behavior usually accompany their words with folded arms and frowns. "Well, sure, you just never saw the signs we posted" or "Ms. Planning Director, you don't really expect us to believe you didn't notice your brother-in-law's violation." Similar to assuming guilt, this type of posture puts you at a disadvantage because people will tend to side with someone who is being insulted.

Are you afraid to say "I don't know"? More than any others, these three little words can endear public officials to their constituents. Perhaps that is because they are said so seldom. Being willing to admit fallibility is the first step in putting yourself and others on a level plane on which true interchange can take place. To have credi-

bility, however, the admittance should be followed up with, "But I will find out for you." Then, make sure you do — as soon as possible.

Do you maintain eye contact? If you are really interested in hearing what people have to say, you will look them in the eye, and nod occasionally to show you are listening. That does not necessarily connote your agreement. It does show they have your attention.

Are you always polite and respectful? Too many public meetings degenerate into name calling and chaos through neglect of common civility. Citizens who brave ice storms, heat waves, or the comfort of their living rooms to show up at a public forum deserve our respect, no matter how we feel about their opinions. It is important that public officials speak in measured tones, address each person appropriately, and otherwise model the kind of behavior they expect from the audience.

Do you hold a monologue or a dialogue? This is perhaps the most important aspect of good communication. Too often, what passes for "conversation" is merely two people speaking in turns, neither one listening or responding to the other. In a true dialogue, you react to what the other person is saying because you realize you are not the only one who is the repository of truth and goodness.

All these techniques can help planning commission meetings be true arenas where all points of view are explored and discussed. ♦

Elaine Cogan, partner in the Portland, Oregon, planning and communications firm of Cogan Owens Cogan, is a consultant in communications and strategic planning. Her column appears in each issue of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*.

