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TO: Executive Addressed

FR: James E. Lukaszewski, APR, Fellow PRSA Chairman

RE: Understanding Public Official Decision Making During Controversial Issues

Public official behavior during controversial, high-profile situations is quite predictable once you understand that his or her beliefs and values are different from those of businesses, community advocates, and advocacy groups. Fundamentally, the public official's job is to protect the public from victimization, harm, negative events, and a wide variety of threats, and to merge data and information with public emotion to make the right public decisions. Here's a look at the public official's decision-making cycle (from the vantage point of a former public official) when a very high-profile problem or issue needs to be resolved.

- Step #1 *Assistance:* When you first approach a public official with a project or concept, there's usually an offer of help along with encouragement and support.
- Step #2 *Absence:* With the first negative news story or calls from concerned or angry neighbors, activists, and opponents, suddenly there are numerous questions about the project or concept, and the public official is slow to return your phone calls, even though he or she may still express support privately.
- Step #3 *Abandonment:* As negative publicity and pressure mount, you begin to get the message that until there's a lot more public discussion, the public official simply will not return your phone calls. It's now your responsibility to inform and convince the public.
- Step #4 *Antagonism:* As you move your project or concept forward, you find the public official encouraging citizens to question, oppose, and demand enormous amounts of data, facts, and information. As public meetings are scheduled, the public official is busy listening and organizing. It may appear that he or she is working for the other side.
- Step #5 *Activism:* At the public meetings, the public official literally may be the first speaker on behalf of neighbors and others who oppose your project or concept.
- Step #6 *Action:* As time passes and it becomes clear that you will stay in town, keep your plant open, and accommodate community concerns, the public official will begin working quietly behind-the-scenes, or with very little publicity, to begin resolving the issues and forging a politically acceptable

compromise.

Step #7 *Acclaim:* If you listen, compromise, even work with the unconvinced, you will probably get less than you asked for but more than you need. Whether it's a permit, license, or regulatory legislation, this same local official will now step forward and accept the credit for having successfully resolved the matter. You will applaud and name the new facility for the politician's mother.

We call this pattern of behavior "democracy." Most organizations won't achieve their objectives until they understand it and structure all organizational decision making, action, and communication accordingly.

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