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IN DEPTH: PUBLIC COMPANIES QUARTERLY

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Corporate America woos public by diffusing anger with empathy

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In a scene from one of those instantly recognizable cartoons from The New Yorker, two top executives have just finished their presentations at the company's annual shareholders' meeting. Now it's the shareholders' turn to speak. There's a long line of people waiting at the microphone as the one executive whispers to the other, "This is the part of capitalism I hate!"

A growing sense of anger toward corporate America is on the rise. Executives are facing shareholders who are angry about the company's stock price, executive compensation, overstated earnings estimates, accounting practices, choice of auditor and more.

Across the country, battles are being waged between citizens' groups and large retailers, drug companies and health maintenance organizations. In some cases, people are objecting to a company's policies, practices or prices. In other cases, people oppose the size of a new facility or proposed expansion, or to the very presence of the facility.

Today, the NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome encompasses opposition to more than just power plants, landfills or factories. Helping fuel that anger are organizations such as Sprawl-Busters, which show communities how to mobilize against corporate behemoths.

And it's not just the private sector that's under attack. Angry parents and residents are challenging all sorts of decisions being made by school boards and city councils.

Says Dr. Jimmy Creel, superintendent of Port Neches-Groves Independent School District, "We deal with parents who become upset when the school imposes discipline they cannot or will not administer themselves. Sometimes parents are so angry they actually threaten physical violence. The threat is so real there's reason to believe they may carry it through."

Public anger is not new. But it is more common, more newsworthy and more damaging than it used to be. It is also more avoidable and more manageable. In recent years much has been learned about what causes public anger, and what works and what doesn't work when dealing with an angry public.

If an organization anticipates an encounter with angry people, its leaders would be wise to follow these practical guidelines on how to deal with individuals who are upset, angry, aggressive or even verbally abusive in public. These and other techniques taught in a workshop on dealing with public anger are based on case studies, behavioral models and proven psychological principles.

- Prepare in advance. The time to develop a strategy for dealing with an angry public is not during the meeting, the event or the encounter. Executives in the hot seat should have a plan clearly in mind before arriving. And they should be aware of their own reactions to difficult people and stressful situations.

- Take preventive action. The leader of a meeting can significantly reduce aggressive, disruptive behavior by making it easier to identify individuals and by holding them personally responsible for their antisocial actions.

For example, name tags should be used and people should be instructed to identify themselves before speaking or testifying (standard procedure during the "open mike" portion of school board or city council meetings). The leader should call upon people by name whenever possible. This removes the anonymity that encourages them to behave angrily.

If practical, leaders should greet audience members — shake their hands — as they arrive. People are less likely to lash out when they've made physical contact.

- Allow acceptable venting. Rather than trying to stop an outburst, it may be helpful to allow an angry person to let off steam. A good rule of thumb for a person conducting a meeting is to permit one or two minutes of uninterrupted venting (people tend to run out of steam after a few minutes). During this venting period, no advice or feedback should be offered. The leader should interrupt only if someone is verbally abusive.
- Demonstrate empathy. One of the most effective ways of calming people down is by empathizing with them or their situations, and showing empathy. (According to research, expressing empathy accounts for 50 percent of a person's credibility and is assessed in the first 30 seconds.) A leader may be able to put himself in the position of an angry person by recalling a similar experience of his own. Then, he should respond succinctly in an even, nondramatic tone, with words that show concern and caring.
- Admit mistakes. A straightforward acknowledgment of error goes a long way toward changing the behavior of angry people. When appropriate, the company spokesperson should provide a prompt, verbalized, public admission that a problem occurred, or that something could have been handled better. Remember that there is a difference between accepting blame and accepting responsibility.
- Know when to stop. Although company representatives should never leave a public meeting early, and they should do what they can to prevent an angry person from storming out, there may be times when they should end the meeting or encounter. For example, if a situation becomes extremely tense, they might call for a short break. Then they can appeal directly to those who are disruptive for their cooperation.

Another strategy may be to temporarily jettison prepared remarks (in the case of a presentation) and seek input from the audience. If the person presiding cannot regain control, he may have to indicate that perhaps the best approach is to adjourn. This is a better approach than allowing the meeting to spiral out of control.

Other strategies for defusing public anger apply to specific situations, such as handling difficult (including threatening) phone calls, which are on the rise.

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