ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY
Addressing Safety & Liability Concerns While Improving Customer Relationships

PAGE 6

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

SUPERBUGS:  
Wanted Dead, Not Alive!  
PAGE 12

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION:  
The Risks and Opportunities  
PAGE 15
ENGAGING YOUR
COMMUNITY
ADDRESSING SAFETY & LIABILITY CONCERNS WHILE IMPROVING CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

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What do you do when the “perfect storm” of socio-economic stress, cultural differences, and political drama come together with catastrophic results? ... risk management, of course. And risk management would have had you prepare for the catastrophe long before it occurred with contingency thinking, enterprise-wise preparation and discussions, and an intentional engagement of your entity’s diverse stakeholders such that your entire community feels “a part of” your public entity instead of “apart from” your entity. Community engagement...do it...now.

The great and always entertaining Yogi Berra, favorite son of Missouri and New York Yankee Hall of Famer, is famously quoted as saying, “The future just ain’t what it used to be.” This is an appropriate mantra for the public sector and its relationships with its citizens and stakeholders going forward.
The relationship that law enforcement has with your community certainly grabs the headlines and the lead story on the six o’clock news, but adverse and negative encounters with members of the general public can happen within any department or discipline when you’re responsible for providing public services. Most people know why effective land use regulations are important to building a good quality of life in your community… until it’s YOUR piece of property that you can’t get re-zoned. Most people know why appropriate building and fire codes are important to home values and life safety in your community… until it’s YOUR new deck or garage that is having to be rebuilt because the construction doesn’t meet code. And most people know why having effective speed limits are important to life safety and quality of life in a community… until it’s YOU being pulled over for speeding when you are late for a meeting with your boss. And this potential negative “lean” when providing public services can occur in every department or functional service area.

Government and other public entities impact, influence and even control many aspects of community life. Perceptions of how public services are being provided shape citizens’ opinions about its local government or service provider. Perceptions will get shaped… so the public entity had better be about doing its best to help shape them in a positive manner. In other words, a negative event is coming. It may be a zoning request turned down, a failed fire inspection, a traffic accident that is the fault of one of your entity’s maintenance workers, a severe injury at a city park, or a tragic use of deadly force by one of your law enforcement personnel. To think in terms of a balance sheet or ledger, the big “debit” is coming, so what are you doing daily to create “credits” on your side of the ledger?

COMMUNITY TRUST ACCOUNT

The absence of adequate credits on the entity’s side of the ledger feeds a natural development in any organizational relationship of “us versus them” or “in versus out.” The natural development of a negative “lean” when public services are being provided is exacerbated during adversarial relationships and tragic encounters. Therefore, the public entity must be about developing emotional capital within its community, building credits on its community ledger, and maximizing its “community trust account.”

When the perception of the public entity is that it provides poor service on the front end, poor customer service on the back end, a lack of transparency regarding its operations, and/or that it simply will not listen to citizens/customers, the response from those depending upon those services tends to manifest as disengagement, indifference, apathy, frustration, and even anger. And the results of that anger have been making the headlines in recent years in the form of riots, vandalism, serious injuries, liability lawsuits, and destruction of property. Your “community” is better than that… for truly, “we are all in this together.” An assertive community engagement effort will help in addressing these tragic losses.

MANAGING THE INTERPERSONAL TRANSACTION

The vast majority of your citizens/customers value and appreciate the services public entities provide. Given an equal set of circumstances, the reasonable members of your community will line up behind their public entity. Obviously, you’re not going to reach everyone and there are some within your community who will oppose you no matter what. But that is a small percentage of most every community.

We all know that it doesn’t take much to make a first impression. This can either be positive or negative. Most interpersonal interactions are neutral until one party or the other assigns either a positive or negative value to that interaction or transaction. Even if one of your organization’s employees continues to assign a positive value to an interaction with a member of your community, this does not preclude them from remaining diligent to the possibility that this interaction could turn negative (or even dangerous) based upon the actions/values of the other party.

To paraphrase noted police training expert, Lt. Col. (ret) Dave Grossman, the public is made up of wolves and sheep. Law enforcement’s calling (and to a degree, public servants in general) is to serve as sheepdogs… to stand between the sheep and the wolves who would do them harm. And we depend upon a public servant’s ability to know the difference. A public servant can’t treat the wolves as though they are sheep for their own safety… but they absolutely can’t treat the sheep as though they are wolves. As Grossman points out, the primary difference between the wolves and the sheepdogs is compassion for the sheep.

The bottom line is this: if we are asking our community to see things from the service provider perspective and not rely on assumptions, the organization should at least make an effort to understand the citizen/customer perspective… Let us resolve to interact with our citizens/customers with respect as far as it is within our power to do so.”
provider perspective and not rely on assumptions, the organization should at least make an effort to understand the citizen/customer perspective and not rely on assumptions. Let us resolve to interact with our citizens/customers with respect as far as it is within our power to do so.

**INTERNAL ENGAGEMENT PLAN**

Leadership must make community engagement an organizational priority. An engagement coordinator should be appointed, and then the organization should begin to build its engagement team. That engagement team should then begin to develop a comprehensive engagement plan that seeks to educate internally and inform externally to draw input from the diverse elements within your community or customer base. The plan must be intentional about identifying every stakeholder segment within your community and create multiple avenues for each segment to be engaged. The plan should also be intentional about trying to shape the perceptions of the services being provided and the people that are providing them.

The internal engagement plan must address how to keep customer/citizen efforts current and fresh. Further, the plan must include multiple methods of infusing the appropriate engagement culture into the organization.

**EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT PLAN**

Out of the internal engagement plan comes a natural cultivation of the external engagement plan. The engagement team (and by extension, the entire organization) needs to study and know the community, citizens and customers. Assess and understand their needs. Again, the foundation of engagement is that citizens/customers feel “a part of” the community and the services being provided, not “apart from” the community. Seek greater opportunities to engage citizens, customers and community groups to build relationships and trust. Provide multichannel avenues that include a comprehensive array of communication vehicles, such as telephone, mail, email, social, mobile, web-based, etc. The external plan should contain methods of identifying and then developing relationships with civic groups, homeowners associations, clergy, and other community leaders. In short, community engagement must be deliberate, inclusive, intentional, ongoing, and NOT simply in response to a crisis. The crisis response approach will be perceived as disingenuous and condescending.

**RESPONSIBILITY**

Remember, each employee must serve as a “Good Will Ambassador” for your organization. In employee evaluations, personnel should be evaluated on their ability and performance to that end. When citizens/customers think about your organization, they think of their experiences with the individual employees of your organization with whom they’ve been in contact: the maintenance person; the building inspector; the receivables clerk; the sanitation collector; the police officer. This is your daily opportunity to draw the reasonable members of your community to you, as opposed to building a wall between you... or worse, pushing them away.

A proactive community engagement effort will go a long way toward creating preemptive, constructive “action” that builds community... instead of creating an environment ripe for explosive “reaction” that tears a community apart when that tragic, adverse and/or negative event occurs. What every community needs when that tragic event occurs is an objective evaluation of the facts surrounding the event, and the degree to which your organization has engaged its community and built “credits” in its community trust account will go a long way toward a reasonable resolution of any conflict... and help mitigate the loss exposures to your people, the public, and your property.

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