Effective Group Participation Skills

As a Project Manager, your success achieving a Corrective Action depends, in part, on your level of skill development in working with other people. Educational systems often fail to provide skill development in this subject area. As an aid to you as a Project Manager, this Communication Tool offers a summary of some group participation skills along with a self-assessment to help you determine your areas of strength and further development.

As a RCRA Corrective Action Project Manager, **your ability to work effectively with others** such as the facility, the public, colleagues/managers/employees in your agency, or other regulatory agencies greatly influences the ease and success of your Corrective Action projects. Effective group participation skills can be learned or developed over time. The first step is determining your current skill level. The following table is a tool to help you assess your current group participation skills:

1) The left column lists the specific "Group Participation Skills," behavior you might use in a discussion, meeting, phone call, or interaction with the facility, the public, the other regulatory agency, or your own agency.

2) In the next column, place a check mark in one of the three boxes in the middle to indicate the extent to which you have developed and apply this skill in RCRA Corrective Action projects.

3) When you complete this self-assessment, circle those group participation skills for which you have checked the accompanying boxes "Not at all" or "Partially." Then, review the right-hand column to see how you can practice this skill and apply it in the future.

Effective Group Participation Skills

Group Participation Skills	Extent to which I have developed and apply this skill in RCRA Corrective Action			To practice this skill . . .
	Not at all	Partially	Totally	
Paraphrasing				Verbally summarize what you hear another say, and ask if it is accurate.
Information or opinion-seeking				Assess what information is relevant to the discussion, and ask others for that information or for their opinion.
Clarifying				State your ideas clearly and directly. Offer examples or illustrations.
Summarizing				In two sentences or less, identify the main point(s) of what you just said.
Testing ideas				Pose a question such as, "What if we (insert idea)? What would be the benefits? The obstacles?"
Integrating ideas				Combine the suggestions and ideas presented into a new idea.
Information or opinion-giving				Assess what information is relevant to the discussion, then provide helpful information or a helpful opinion.
Compromising				Offer a solution that may be acceptable to all parties.
Reducing tension				Offer some levity or humor in discussion. Lighten up the situation by telling a "light" story.
Setting standards				Suggest guidelines or minimum criteria against which the group might evaluate potential solutions.
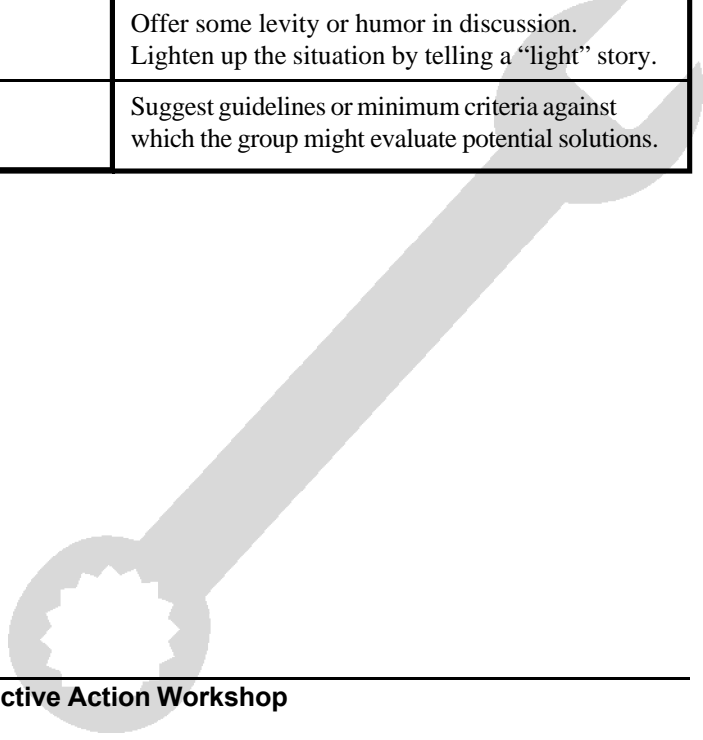
Effective Meetings with the Facility

Meetings can be productive means of accelerating a Corrective Action or a waste of time. Whether a meeting is productive or nonproductive depends, in part, on you as a Project Manager. You can improve the likelihood of a productive meeting(s) with tangible outcomes by applying some of the ideas and practices provided below.

As a RCRA Corrective Action Project Manager, you may meet routinely with the representatives of a facility undergoing a Corrective Action. A productive working relationship with the facility may make your job easier, more enjoyable and may help the facility achieve Corrective Action Results more quickly and successfully. A productive working relationship is often created through shared successes, and effective meetings can be one way to help create shared successes. Meetings are a productive means to share ideas, educate the facility, obtain information first-hand, and provide information first-hand. Meetings are an opportunity to conduct a site walk of the facility; to meet with key facility personnel, especially those with past history of the facility, and those who will be involved in implementing a Corrective Action; to review the facility's Conceptual Site Model, or to share yours; to openly and informally discuss future land use options; and to share and informally discuss other ideas.

This communication tool will assist you in helping promote or build productive meetings between the regulatory agencies and the facility to achieve a RCRA Corrective Action Result.

Key actions you can take to help create productive meetings include:

- ***Focus discussions on Something Tangible, Specific, and in Common.*** Discussions between a facility and a regulatory agency can be very general, non-specific, and highly theoretical. You may find yourself frustrated when what you thought you heard does not correlate with the actions or activities following a "meeting of the minds". In meetings, by focusing the facility's and your attention on something very tangible, specific, and in common, you increase the likelihood that meeting outcomes produce more tangible results. Environmental Indicators (EIs), a Conceptual Site Model (CSM), or groundwater models are some examples of topics that are very tangible, specific, and ideally in common. Some Regional Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offices request the facility complete EI forms so that the EPA office and the facility then compare forms and better define areas of agreement and disagreement. These offices find this focuses the discussions on the more technical versus conceptual topics, and a Corrective Action proceeds more readily.

- ***Get the 'Right' People to Participate.*** Much work goes into making effective Corrective Action decisions. The process can often take months or years. The discussions, the selection of assumptions, the choice of risk assessment scenarios - all these lead over time to Corrective Action decisions. A method to streamline decision-making is to involve the 'right' people throughout the process, even during early stages of information gathering and decision-making. The 'right' people are those in the position to make Corrective Action decisions. This may often include a facility representative who is empowered to make Corrective Action decisions. It will also likely include their consultants. Find out who these people are, and meet with them to make best use of your time.

- ***Clarify Roles and Responsibilities.*** It is important to maintain your role as a representative of a regulatory agency. The facility will benefit by your clarifying your role in these meetings and in the RCRA Corrective Action process. You will benefit from hearing the facility verbalize what they view as their role and their responsibilities in the Corrective Action process. You more easily can

correct any misunderstandings when you are aware of areas of misperception. Clarifying roles and responsibilities is especially important in the area of public participation, where you and the facility have joint responsibilities.

- *Maintain Regular Meetings.* A RCRA Corrective Action, like all successful endeavors, requires a continuous focus of attention and energy over time. Quarterly meetings, for example, are one means to keep the attention and energy of the facility and regulatory agency focused on achieving the same Corrective Action Results. You can help monitor regular meetings an by creating an ongoing schedule agreed to by all participants. Scheduling the time on everyone's calendar can often be difficult, and you can avoid the hassles of scheduling these meetings by setting up a regular date, for example "the Tuesday of the first full week of each quarter."

- *Create a "Roadmap."* A "Roadmap" is a plan with milestones, an approach to achieving an end result, in this case Corrective Action Results. By working with the facility to outline a "Roadmap" to achieve a Corrective Action, you can provide your input and suggestions and also have an idea of how the facility plans to proceed and what progress you can expect. Creating a plan with milestones helps reduce unwanted surprises or misunderstandings, and it creates a common tool that you and the facility can use to move toward a Corrective Action Result.

- *Clarify Important Decisions.* Meetings are important opportunities to not only exchange information, but also to clarify past decisions, suggest tentative future decisions, and clarify a present course of action. With the 'right' people present, this is an opportunity to discuss and get as close as possible to clarifying a decision or the "next steps." Summarize decisions at the meeting, and check to ensure you and everyone have a correct understanding. Together, create a feedback mechanism or a means for everyone to obtain the same information arising out of the meeting. One method is to write your summary of decisions or 'next steps' on flip chart paper during the meeting and obtain everyone's feedback as to the accuracy of your understanding. These can be converted to notes and distributed to all participants after the meeting. Meeting notes might be taken by a designated note-taker, with an agreement to finalize or agree to the content of the notes in a conference call 2 weeks after the meeting.

- *Acknowledge the Shared Successes.* Success breeds more success. Recognize and build on successes, such as the ability of your agency and the facility to agree on the fundamental aspects of a conceptual site model, or the success a facility has achieved in accomplishing an Interim Action. Mention the successes, ask the representatives at the meetings what helped create these successes, and encourage the group to continue building on these activities and behaviors that resulted in a success.
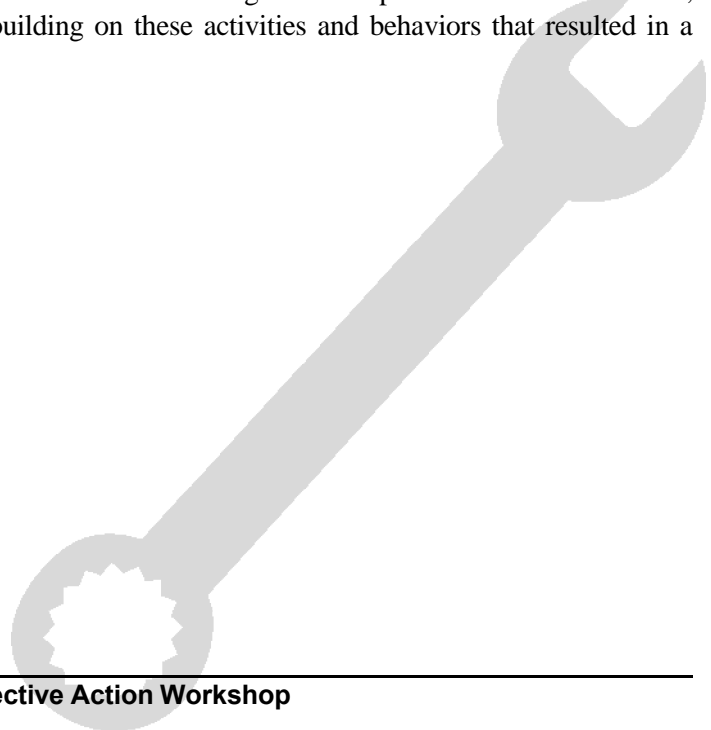
Working with Resistance

As a Project Manager, achieving your goals may require a change in another's attitudes, behaviors, or actions. Often, a person or an organization's first response to change appears in the form of resistance. Therefore, at times you encounter resistance from the facility, the public, your colleagues, or other regulatory agencies. Unknowingly, some of your automatic responses may actually increase another's resistance and thereby impact a Corrective Action. This Communication Tool can help you both understand and reduce this natural resistance through increasing your knowledge and developing some specific skills.

In a RCRA Corrective Action project, you may often face resistance and challenges when working with the facility, the public, colleagues within your own organization, and colleagues in other regulatory agencies. This is normal and natural, as you are working with people and organizations with different beliefs, values, and priorities. For example, a facility may fail to meet your expectations. A public group or representative may continue to press for change or expediency in a particular Corrective Action. Members within your own agency may place higher priority on aspects of a Corrective Action you view as less urgent and important. Or, another regulatory agency may disagree with your approach in handling a particular Corrective Action.

You can more easily and directly achieve a RCRA Corrective Action Result by reducing the resistance between yourself, the facility, the public, and colleagues in your and other regulatory agencies. The first step is educating yourself on just what is resistance, what increases it, and what you can do to decrease the resistance.

What is resistance?

- **Resistance is often a person or an organization's first response to making a change.** It is a natural response to help maintain one's current beliefs, values, and priorities. As a RCRA Corrective Action Project Manager, you are often asking a person or an organization to modify in part their beliefs, values, or priorities to more highly regard environmental cleanup.

What increases resistance?

- **Resistance often increases when people feel they are 'not fully heard' or are disregarded.** For example, if a local resident at a public meeting expresses a concern to the facility or regulatory agency and that concern is disregarded, the resident's resistance to changing a belief, value, or priority may increase.

- **Resistance often increases if you put up "roadblocks" to communication.** These may include: threatening, preaching, arguing, criticizing, blaming, ridiculing, shaming, or being overly directive. As a RCRA Corrective Action Program Manager, you may choose or need to use these behaviors in certain circumstances. You can benefit by recognizing these will likely create "roadblocks" to communication and make it difficult to return to a more collaborative, consensus-building approach with a facility, the public, or regulatory agencies.

How can I reduce resistance?

It is helpful to recognize that resistance, rather than being a tug of war, represents an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to discover new ideas and solutions. Rather than being a game in which someone is right and someone is wrong, you can develop or enhance your skills to reduce resistance and create a bridge of communication between yourself, the facility, the public, and colleagues in regulatory agencies.

- **Listening Skills.** The first step in dealing with resistance is to truly ***understand, not necessarily agree with, but at a minimum, understand another's point of view***. Some practical suggestions for developing your listening skills include:

  — Stop talking.

  — Empathize.

  — Recognize your own judgements, prejudices, and biases.

  — Demonstrate you are listening with maintaining good eye contact, appropriate facial gestures, frequent nods to assure that you hear what they are saying, and occasional "uh huh" or "I hear you."

  — Get their main concerns.

  — Avoid jumping to conclusions.

- **Acknowledgment Skills.** The next step in dealing with resistance is to ***openly acknowledge or communicate another's point of view.*** It is helpful, where a person expresses a great deal of emotion, to ***openly acknowledge the person's emotion***. This requires effectively listening not only for what is said (the content) but also for the feeling or emotion behind the content. Some ways to openly acknowledge another's emotions include phrases such as the following:

  — I sense you might <u>feel</u> ....

  — You sound as though you are <u>anxious</u> (or <u>worried</u>, or <u>afraid</u>) about ....

  — It seems you are very <u>upset</u> about ...

  — You look <u>worried</u> about ...

  — You appear <u>confused</u>/<u>frustrated</u> about ...

  — This seems <u>unfair</u> to you that ...

  Only <u>after</u> the other person feels their point of view and emotions (if there is emotion behind the communication) will the person be open and receptive to options, suggestions, and problem-solving. Attempting to provide options and suggestions, or to problem-solve, <u>before</u> they feel heard and understood actually <u>increases</u> the resistance.

- **Flexibility Skills.** Flexibility is the skill of being adaptable, responsive to change, resilient. As a RCRA Corrective Action Project Manager, you may find this skill most valuable as you work to bring together the different ideas and perspectives of yourself, the facility, the public, and other regulatory agencies. You may find it useful to offer or consider different possible alternatives. You may find it beneficial to more openly consider another's point of view, such as the facility's assumptions that form the basis of their conceptual site model, a community's future land use ideas, or your technical expert's opinions.

Once I reduce the resistance, what next?

After you reduce the resistance through effectively listening, openly acknowledging another's point of view, and demonstrating openness to new ideas and options, you can ***help create a bridge*** of understanding between yourself, the facility, the public, or colleagues in the regulatory organizations. You do this by ***building on areas of agreement.*** Sometimes you must "peel the onion" to discover the areas of agreement. "Peeling the onion" involves asking questions, listening, and discovering those areas of agreement. Bring these to the surface, and work with others to start building on even small areas of disagreement. A small success can lead to a larger success. Enough of these successes leads to RCRA Corrective Action Results.