Ten commandments for working with your county board

In a session on how county engineers can and should communicate with their county boards and the media, the first speaker caused quite a stir. “Our first speaker,” moderator Charles Cadenhead said, “is an author, shepherd, law-giver, and prophet. He was born in 1391 B.C. and spent most of his career in the Middle East where he encountered burning bushes and helped people cross the Red Sea. In his modern engineering career, he has dealt with burning issues and turbulent political waters—and has wandered the county highway department for 24 years. And here he is to present the 10 commandments for dealing with your county board—Moses!” At that point, Washington County, Minnesota, county engineer Don Theisen entered the room from the rear with great ceremony dressed in a “Moses” costume complete with flowing beard, hooded cloak, and a pair of Styrofoam “stone” tablets.

But Theisen was serious about his message. His 10 commandments for working with county boards are:

1. Establish a good relationship with your county board members. Learn their wives’ (or husbands’) names and their dogs’ names. In fact, establish good relationships with everyone else too because you never know who your next county board member will be.

2. Always be available to any county board member. Your staff knows that any time a county board member or county administrator calls, they are to interrupt you—pull you out of the meeting—and that goes 24/7.

3. Never embarrass a board member in public. Sooner or later, every board member will say something wrong. Unless someone’s going to die as a result of that, you can always correct the board member in private. If needed, explain why a board member can’t attend a meeting and say he or she is very interested in the topic and you’ll update them later.

4. Don’t ever speak negatively about a board member—not even in private. In fact, there’s no such thing as a private conversation in this day and age. Even if they insult you, take it professionally—not personally. Rise above it. If you go around saying you work for a bunch of idiots, what does that say about you?

5. Always give thanks and praise to the board. If a resident thanks you, say it was the board that made it possible. Agree with board members before the meeting that, if a
sticky issue goes a certain way, you’ll wear the black hat and let them wear the white hats.

6. Never ask the board what to do on an engineering issue. If you don’t want the board to run your department, don’t ask them to do it. The trick is to frame engineering decisions as policy issues. If there’s a sticky issue like a driveway permit you don’t want to grant, avoid focusing on that particular permit and make the discussion about the overall policy on access to roads.

7. Treat every complaint before the board as a top priority—and if you solve it, let the board member pass on the good news. When the board sends you a constituent’s complaint, always start the call to the constituent by saying “I’m following up on your discussion with Commissioner Smith.” And the faster the better! Respond the same day and at least tell the resident you’re working on it and when they can expect a complete response.

8. Provide the board with professional recommendations. Give them the professional pros and cons. And do it in a way that your neighbor could understand. Don’t tell people we build the roads this way because that’s the standard. Tell them we do it because, when Johnny goes off the road, we don’t want him to hit a power pole that will kill him. Always tell them a story.

9. Learn that you don’t need to respond to every comment. Let the bad ones go by, and let the board bask in the good comments. You also need to know when they’ve bought your milk so you don’t need to try to sell them the cow. Just let that vote be taken, and move on.

10. Never allow a bad vote to be taken. If you know you don’t have the votes, find a way to defer the vote to a later meeting. Say, “The board has asked good questions about this—and they’re still unanswered, so I’d be glad to come back at a future date with better information on this important issue.” Then work behind the scenes. Once a vote has been taken, it’s hard for officials to switch their votes.

**Working with media**

The next speaker, MnDOT director of communications Kevin Gutknecht, had a tough act to follow, but he held everyone’s attention with useful ideas about how to work with the media.

He observed that Americans think the news media are useful and important—but that they also think the media are more influenced by powerful interests than by what’s good for society. “And people think the local media [are] more trustworthy than national media. So when you need to communicate with the public, ask yourself, ‘Who serves the public that I want to reach—a reporter from the local newspaper or one from a national media outlet?’”

He also pointed out that, “With today’s competitive 24/7 news cycle, you have to get the news out fast or it might never get out at all—and that means you may need to compromise on depth of information in order to be heard. The good news is that the media crave information about transportation, and that puts us in a strong position because we’re the best source. But each reporter wants to find a different angle on the story. So you’ll be questioned more—and in fact, your credibility might be questioned.”

Next Gutknecht asked the rhetorical question, “What makes news news?”—and answered his question twice: as seen by the media themselves and as seen by the public. “The media care about proximity; they’re mostly interested in what happens in their immediate vicinity. Also, they’re looking for conflict. If someone opposes you, that’s when it becomes news. And the media’s favorite conflict is one between a homeowner and government.” From the public’s perspective, he said news means issues that are about money. “So they’re very interested in snowplowing, road construction, speed limits, and litter.”

**Communicate to the public through the media**

Gutknecht said the job of the county engineer is to provide the media with clear, accurate, timely, and consistent information—because “that’s how you can help inform, educate, and involve citizens. That’s why it’s critical to the success of your agency to have good working relationships with the media.”

“When you need to give out information, the first decision is: Who’s going to handle it? A staff member? You? Or some other subject-matter expert? Next, decide how to communicate. And today, you have to develop both a traditional media strategy and a social media strategy. Will you get the news out by phone, e-mail, or by holding a news conference? Or should you use Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube? News releases are a good option because they allow you to send complex information to several media outlets simultaneously. At MnDOT, we’ve found that Twitter is a good way to send out our news releases. And YouTube has changed the nature of TV and video because it allows stories to remain available for extended periods.”
Choose the right medium for the message
Gutknecht characterized the various types of media that might want to interview an engineer: “The nature of TV makes reporters hungry for action. Also, they’re usually working on short deadlines. If you want to provide in-depth coverage of an issue, local cable TV is a good option. It’s a natural for transportation and transit projects.”

Next Gutknecht pointed out that, in general, TV and print media are talking to different audiences. “People who read print media usually have more advanced education,” he said, quoting a 2009 study by the consulting firm iMedia Advisory. “Print can give you more in-depth treatment and it automatically lends a certain weight to the content. And their stories tend to stick around longer.”

“While print media are having trouble surviving, radio is doing great,” he continued. “About 85 percent of people 12 years or older listen to radio every day. They typically listen to several stations, tuning in for short periods of time. Radio stories have less impact initially; you tend to forget the content because there’s always another story right afterwards. But the audience tends to be captive—often in the car.”

Control the interview; don’t be controlled
To illustrate how not to be interviewed, Gutknecht showed a video clip from The Bob Newhart Show in which Dr. Hartley is cajoled into an interview by a flirty TV host who proceeds to reveal herself as a diabolical attack journalist. The moral of the story, Gutknecht said, is to decide if it’s a good idea to allow yourself to be interviewed in the first place. Then he provided tips on how an engineer can maintain control when being interviewed.

Before the interview
“Be prepared! Contact your public affairs person, information coordinator, or other department heads for background on the reporter or the media outlet—and arrange to have those colleagues present during the interview. Be sure to inform your organization that you’re going to do the interview. When setting up the interview, ask the reporter what the scope will be—and who else has been interviewed—and what the deadline is. On TV, think about where you want to be interviewed and pay attention to the background of the camera shot. Get out of your office; you look like a bureaucrat there. Be interviewed where there’s action, like a job site. To prepare yourself, answer these questions: Why am I conducting the interview? Who is my audience and why do they care? How will information affect them?”

During the interview
Gutknecht provided excellent ideas on how to maintain focus during an interview:
• Keep it simple and brief; remember, they may only use a few seconds of what you say. Make it so your brother the art major can understand it.
• Prepare three main points that you want to get across and weave them throughout your answers.
• When you’ve answered the question once, stop talking.
• Avoid negative information; turn a negative question into a positive. To achieve that, talk about benefits, not features; for example, tell them the end result of the highway project—not about the delay.
• Don’t provide personal opinions; provide public information. If they ask “What do you think?” say you represent the county.
• Don’t go off the record; there’s no such thing for some reporters.
• Don’t say “No comment.” If you don’t know the answer, say so. And never comment on an issue in litigation; those issues should be tried in the courtroom, not in the media.
• Don’t speculate; your speculation will be taken as reality.

Next, he gave tips on personal appearance on TV:
• Control how you react to questions; don’t make funny faces.
• Keep your feet flat on the floor.
• Control your hands.
• Don’t label the question by saying, “That’s a good question.”
• Don’t say the reporter’s name during the interview; remember: you’re talking to the public.
• Sit still—don’t rock, chew gum, or slouch.
• Forget the camera; keep your eyes on the interviewer; that makes it easier to relax.
• Use a normal tone of voice.
• Remember the photographers and thank them; sometimes they have been there forever while the reporters come and go.

After the interview
Finally, Gutknecht talked about what to do after the interview:
• Monitor the coverage you get in all media.
• Thank them for a job well done—or if the story has factual errors, call the reporter and correct the inaccurate information. Print media will print a retraction. Broadcast media may or may not.
• Let your organization know you’ve done the interview.

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