Dealing with Adversarial People
Managing Natural Resource Disputes – No.9

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Resource disputes, like all disputes, are characterized by adversarial behavior. People who display adversarial behavior can be described as uncooperative, argumentative, hostile, and antagonistic. It is human nature to view those individuals with competing interests that are significantly different from your own as the enemy.

Adversarial behavior is the most familiar response to disputes (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988). The higher the stakes involved in the dispute the more adversity you may encounter. It is important therefore, in collaborative processes, to understand that dealing with people can be challenging at times. Individuals you have always known as rational and settled in their behavior can become adversarial and combative. It is a good idea to understand why people behave as adversaries during disputes and what approaches might lessen adversarial behavior.

UNDERSTANDING ADVERSARIAL Behavior

People can be adversarial for a variety of reasons. There are at least five reasons. These include:

1. **Individuals are adversarial when taken by surprise.** Even if an issue has surfaced and perhaps has been featured in the local news, sometimes a dispute does not become real until livelihoods are seriously threatened or court summonses are served. The announcement of proposals, solutions or legislation to resolve a dispute is likely to be met with combative opposition if individuals feel they have not been adequately involved in the process to reach the decisions nor have had sufficient control over the decisions made.

2. **People may consciously choose to be adversarial when stakes are high.** People may feel that adversarial behavior is the best way and perhaps only way to communicate
their interests. They may fear that a show of willingness to collaborate with others will only enable others to perceive them as weak. This in turn might affect their ability to negotiate in a hard bargaining environment.

3. **It is fairly common for individuals in a dispute to behave as their opponents behave.** If one participant in the collaborative process behaves in an adversarial way it can set in motion a chain reaction. Blame seeking, name-callings, stereotyping individuals, and circulating subversive rumors about individuals are actions that tend to be mirrored by opponents in adversarial environments. The mirroring can become brutally competitive with one side not wanting to be outdone by the other. Others may react simply to defend themselves or to “one-up” the first action.

4. **Some individuals take an adversarial approach to disputes because that is what is most familiar.** Individuals may feel that courts and lawyers are the most comfortable way to deal with disputes. They may feel that in every dispute there must be a winner and a loser. This is certainly a customary and socially acceptable approach to dealing with disputes. There may be a history of litigation that is difficult to break. Arbitration, however, often yields unpredictable results. Scientific research, public testimony, and passionate presentations never guarantee that all issues will be adequately heard or satisfactory decisions reached.

5. **In some cases individuals may feel that the process in which they are engaged offers no better alternative than to be adversarial.** Past experiences are important teachers. If individuals have never experienced an alternative strategy for managing disputes other than adversarial behavior, they simply know of no other way. They may feel trapped further by the details of the particular issue. The dispute, for example, may have escalated quickly to a political arena where individuals involved feel that any decision to be made is already out of their hands.

**DEALING WITH ADVERSARIAL PEOPLE**

Experts suggest that collaboration is a logical response to an agitated situation (Gray 1989). Litigation tends to further enhance polarization. Collaboration, alternatively, can produce an environment more conducive to problem solving.

To deal effectively with adversarial people it is necessary to understand your own reactions to adversity (Ury 1991).

> If you watch the negotiations going on around you, you will see countless instances in which people react to each other without thinking. (Ury 1991, p. 31).

When confronted with adversarial behavior a natural reaction is to:

- **Strike back:** When you strike back you may feel that we are giving the adversarial person a ”taste of their own medicine.” This reaction rarely diminishes a hostile environment. It tends, instead, to aggravate hostility. Also, adversarial people tend to be good at being difficult. When you strike back you play their game in which case they are likely to have an advantage.

- **Give in:** When we feel that it is inappropriate or uncomfortable to strike back we may take the opposite stance and simply give in to the interests of the adversarial person. This
reaction, however, does not help us to satisfy our demands. Giving in may simply
strengthen and reward adversarial behavior.

- **End the relationship:** In some cases it may be necessary to end a relationship if you
feel it is destructive to you personally or to the collaborative process. The costs of ending
a key relationship should be evaluated carefully, however. Particularly in resource
disputes where you have little control over who is involved, ending a relationship could be
quite costly. Additionally, once you end a relationship it may be very difficult if not
impossible to resume the relationship.

> A pattern of breaking off relationships means you never get anywhere
  because you are always starting over. (Ury 1991, p.35)

When dealing with adversarial people it is important therefore not to react to their behavior. In
order not to react it may be necessary to distance yourself from your emotions. In *Getting Past
No* (1991), Ury popularized this concept by describing it as "going to the balcony." *Going to the
balcony* simply describes the mental imagery used to distance yourself emotionally from the
combat zone. It refers to the mental process of stepping back from the combative situation and
seeing it objectively. According to Ury, from the balcony, you can assess the conflict in a more
detached way. This allows you to consider the situation more constructively and explore
solutions that are mutually satisfying.

To use this approach effectively, it is necessary to "go to the balcony" before negotiations
begin. This enables you to prepare objectively. Ask yourself what the goal is and remain
focused on the goal. The goal is an agreement that satisfies your interests. It must also satisfy
others as well. Throughout negotiations you must go to the balcony at every opportunity in
order to avoid reacting to your opponent’s behavior.

**IDENTIFYING UNFAIR TACTICS**

In going to the balcony it is necessary to be able to identify or name unfair tactics that you are
likely to confront in dealing with adversarial people. Ury (1991) categorizes unfair tactics into
three groups. People can use the following three tactics to sway the negotiations in their favor:

- **Inflexibility:** They refuse to negotiate further becoming inflexible. They want you to feel
  trapped and to believe there is no other way but their way.

- **Attacks:** They try to intimidate and threaten you so that you give into their demands.

- **Tricks:** They try to deceive you by lying, manipulating data, and otherwise mislead you
  into believing that your decision is best for you when it really satisfies their interests and
  not necessarily your own.

In dealing with adversarial people it is essential that you identify which tactic is being used.
Identifying the tactic will dilute it. It will enable you to more effectively *go to the balcony* to
consider your next move.

Looking for unfair tactics does not mean being overly suspicious but rather attuned to people’s
behavior. It is possible to misunderstand others’ behavior. It becomes critical, therefore, not
jump to conclusions when observing behavior but to keep a mental record of what is being said
and done. Adversarial people tend to use more than one tactic.
Try to keep an accurate count on your feelings in dealing with adversarial people. This will help to prevent you from losing control and reacting to their tactics. One way to refrain from reacting is to "take a time-out." Simply take a break or tell a story to reduce the tension. Finally, never make decisions in the heat of the moment. Instead, make it a point to go the balcony and make your decisions there.

REFERENCES AND READINGS

