

Appendix B: The Risks of Resistance And How to Overcome Them

The paradigm shift underway in stormwater management implies that finding funding solutions for many stormwater problems will require more than “business as usual” technical fixes. The solutions will require behavioral changes among both service providers and the public. Predictably, addressing complex problems which require behavioral changes engenders resistance to change and thus creates risks to those who initiate problem-solving efforts. There are methods, however, for reducing and avoiding such risks.

Technical and Adaptive Problems

As you clarify a problem of how to finance stormwater improvements, you will realize that the problem is one of two basic types. It will be, fundamentally, a **technical problem** or an **adaptive problem** (Compare Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). Technical problems require, for their solution, the application of current know how, and they can be administered by existing authorities. For example, a local jurisdiction faces the problem of how to pay for modest growth in expenses for existing stormwater services and decides that it should do so by imposing a small increase in the tax rate for real property. Staff members who estimate the additional expenses and, once a decision by elected officials has been made, implement the property tax hike have straight forward tasks: apply current know-how; and use standard operating procedures for doing the work. This is a technical problem.

Adaptive problems require, for their solution, learning new ways of working and involving the people with the problem to be part of the process of reaching solutions. The inherent difficulties and expenses of adjusting to MS4 permits and the Chesapeake Bay TMDL, of incorporating environmental values into stormwater management, and of adjusting to the increased risks of severe storm events resulting from the warming earth surface and atmosphere are likely to be adaptive problems. For example, the complexity of governance and magnitude of costs that are being mandated by the EPA/State Governments Phase II Permits and the Bay WIPs will prompt local jurisdictions to consider new ways of gaining revenues and involving landowners in solving the problem. Consider, however, the personal and professional perils of assuming the role of a change agent for solving adaptive problems, particularly adaptive stormwater finance problems.

The Perils of Leading Adaptive Problem-Solving Processes

Adaptive problem solving in local governments and other organizations necessitates the hard work of questioning assumptions and beliefs. It requires that local government officials and citizens give up habitual ways of thinking and acting and begin to behave in new ways. When people are faced with the task of solving an adaptive problem, say for example, the task of effectively and constructively reacting to Phase II Permit requirements, they can be expected to avoid and oppose the task. They might resent the EPA and the state authority that requires the

permit and rant against the authority instead of solving the problem; they might resist taking on the costs implied by the permit; and they might oppose creating a new funding mechanism.

A local government staff member who advocates for creating a new mechanism for stormwater finance takes on this role at his or her own peril. As an agent of change in a situation where local officials and citizens may well want to avoid and oppose a new mechanism, the staff person will put his credibility and position on the line. He or she may need to push for new thinking and behaving in a manner that others view as “going beyond his or her authority.”

Change agents in organizations that face adaptive problems can easily become unpopular. They can be marginalized by the organization. Their efforts can be diverted or attacked. Such are the perils of leading adaptive problem solving processes. There are, however, some practical ideas for responding to resistance and avoiding perils, and, local officials are using the ideas to protect themselves as they move forward to solve stormwater finance problems. Strategies, as provided by Heifetz and Linsky (2002), and examples from the City of Lynchburg, Virginia Water Department demonstrate effective responses.

Practical Ideas and Lessons Learned for Avoiding Perils

Get on the Balcony. To get on the balcony means to remove oneself, from time to time, from the problem-solving “dance on the floor,” and, thus, be able to observe the problem from another perspective. Because not everything about an adaptive problem necessarily requires new ways of working and allocating responsibilities, getting on the balcony helps a change agent to identify and move to solve technical challenges that are bundled into a problem which is basically adaptive. Getting on the balcony also helps the change agent to read the behavior of decision makers for clues about their preferences. And it helps a change agent to gather information about what people elsewhere are doing to solve the problem. For example, in the City of Lynchburg, officials from the municipal Water Department are involved in committees and organizations related to stormwater management in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay Region. Their involvement has provided information about how other jurisdictions are financing new stormwater improvements and services, and it has enhanced the credibility of Water Department officials in their relations with elected officials in the city.

Hold steady. Using this strategy, the change agent will be willing to take the heat, if need be, patiently allowing the problem to ripen, if more time is needed to develop gain an agreement to act, and continuing to focus people’s attention on the need and opportunity to solve the problem. In Lynchburg, the Water Department staff realized in about 2003 that stormwater management methods needed to be reformed. At that time, the department began to “do its homework” and build support for reform among elected decision makers and the public. By 2009, the stormwater problem had ripened sufficiently, and the department moved forward aggressively to form the Stormwater Advisory Committee (SWAC) and make the case to elected officials and the public that the consequences of inaction were unacceptable.

Think politically. This strategy may involve several actions:

- Finding and cultivating partners who share your concerns and values;

- Reaching out to understand the thinking of and build relationships with people who are actively or potentially opposed to your thinking;
- Accepting responsibility, if need be, for your own agency’s contributions to the problem;
- Acknowledging the loss of cherished ideas that will need to be abandoned; and
- Modeling the kind of behavior that will be needed to solve the problem.

In Lynchburg, the Water Department formed the SWAC as a “cross section of stakeholder groups in the city” which, with staffing assistance from the department, formed a consensus to establish a stormwater utility. The SWAC then presented this policy recommendation to the elected officials of the city.

Orchestrate the conflict. To implement this strategy, the change agent will, to the extent possible, create a holding environment wherein conflicts can be worked through, where the temperature of conflict about the problem can be stoked or dampened, and where an appealing vision for the future can be created. A tactic for orchestrating the conflict that is advocated by some organizational development specialists is to focus attention on the positive – appreciating what an organization does well – rather than on eliminating what it does badly. For more information on a positive approach to problem solving in organizations, see *Appreciative Inquiry Commons* (2013). Lynchburg’s SWAC provides an example of a holding environment. In staffing the SWAC, Water Department officials were able to impress on committee members the need for new thinking and working to solve the funding shortfall that would be created by the MS4 Permit requirement and the opportunities that increased funding would provide to solve environmental issues. In this way they helped the committee members envision a path, via the stormwater utility, to a better future.

Give the work back. In following this strategy, the change agent will help decision makers understand the need for the community as a whole to take responsibility for solving the problem. As an official in the Lynchburg Water Department said, “Everyone creates stormwater, so everyone should help to pay for its management.” In giving the work back, the change agent would also minimize his or her interventions, making them as short and simple as possible, making brief observations, instead of issuing lengthy pronouncements, and asking questions, instead of giving answers.