

Talking To Your Decision Makers: A Best Practices Guide

Introduction

<i>Purpose</i>	This Guide will help you better understand: ♦ The role of the local individual(s) or group(s) that oversee and make decisions affecting your water system. ♦ The benefits of having a good relationship with decision makers. ♦ How to effectively communicate your needs to these decision makers.
<i>Target Audience</i>	This Guide is intended for operators and owners of community water systems serving fewer than 10,000 persons.

General Responsibilities of Decision Makers

Decision makers can play a significant role in ensuring that your system is operating efficiently, that your needs are addressed, and that your customers understand the challenges you face and recognize the hard work that you do.

Financial Responsibilities	♦ Review and approve annual budgets and monitor annual spending. ♦ Make financial decisions to ensure your system has sufficient funds to meet current and future needs. ♦ Acquire and approve financing for infrastructure repairs or upgrades. ♦ Acquire and approve financing to enhance system security. ♦ Acquire and set aside funding for operator training and certification.
Managerial Responsibilities	♦ Hire and supervise system staff. ♦ Set staff policy and job descriptions. ♦ Set and provide guidance on system policies. ♦ Determine the strategic vision and goals for the system. ♦ Resolve staff conflicts and address staff needs or complaints.
Communication	♦ Keep customers informed of the current status of the system, upcoming projects, rate setting, staffing changes, and any other key decisions. ♦ Serve as a liaison between system staff and the community. ♦ Ensure that the community is aware of the system's emergency response procedures.

For additional information:

Call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791, visit the EPA Web site at www.epa.gov/safewater/, or contact your state drinking water representative.

Communicating Effectively with Decision Makers

All decisions should be guided by principles that look to the present and future needs of the water system and what is best for the system's customers and the community. Speak with decision makers regularly to avoid communication mishaps and to develop responsive relationships with them. Your communication with decision makers can take many different forms, from short daily updates on your system to more formal meetings. Effective methods of communication include:

- ♦ Daily or weekly e-mail updates
- ♦ Phone calls for updates on specific issues or to get information
- ♦ Weekly memos with system status updates
- ♦ Suggestion boxes near bill collection areas
- ♦ Formal meetings or presentations for requests for new equipment or rate changes

If you already have a good relationship with decision makers, you have a good foundation for ensuring that these meetings are productive and successful. Regardless of your relationship, though, you should always approach meetings with a firm understanding of the issues, your goals, and the audience you are addressing (especially if meetings with decision makers are open to the public). Keep the following in mind when preparing for and attending a meeting with decision makers:

Carefully prepare your case and use supporting documentation.

Infrastructure Upgrade	♦ Bring operational and maintenance records to the meeting with decision makers. ♦ Obtain cost estimates from reputable vendors.
Security System Upgrade	♦ Explain why the water system is vulnerable to security breaches. ♦ Explain how an upgrade will address these issues.
Rate Increase	♦ Bring documentation outlining the impact of past rate increases on your system. ♦ Bring estimates or financial models showing that the rate increase will help your system to continue to provide the appropriate level of service desired by customers.

Tailor your presentation according to the topic and the audience.

New or Inexperienced Decision Makers	♦ Briefly describe your water system, your experience, and your training. ♦ Explain technical terms when talking to decision makers.
Understand Competing Demands	♦ Learn what other funding needs exist in the community. ♦ Explain how your project will protect public health and benefit the community.

Give decision makers the information they need to state your case to the community.

Improve Communication with Customers	♦ Give decision makers non-technical, straightforward reasoning that they can repeat to consumers. ♦ Explain how your proposal will help your system to provide safe, high-quality drinking water to consumers.
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Work with decision makers to develop solutions that everyone can agree on.

Build Respect	♦ Work to understand decision makers' priorities and opinions and help them to understand your own. ♦ Realize that decision makers may not always be able to accommodate your suggestions, especially if decision makers must make community-wide funding decisions.
Understand Common Goals	♦ Remember that decision makers are working towards finding solutions that are in the best interest of the community. ♦ Build a strong working relationship with decision makers so that you can work together to achieve your ultimate goal of providing safe drinking water to the community.