

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



Working with Resistance

Communication Tool for a RCRA Corrective Action Project Manager

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 feel
 - You sound as though you are anxious (or worried, or afraid) about
 - It seems you are very upset about ...
 - You look worried about ...
 - You appear confused/frustrated about ...
 - This seems unfair to you that ...

Only after 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, before they feel heard and understood actually increases 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.