

# Gaining Legitimacy

by Otis White

If there's a question that should give every public official pause, it's this one: "What gives you the right?" Think carefully before you reply. Pointing to the statute books, to your appointment papers, or even to your election is no answer. Nor is reciting your resume, your knowledge of the community, or the seminars you've attended.

Today government legitimacy (and with it the legitimacy of those who work for government) is up for grabs. That's clear in Washington, where the federal government's role is under attack. But it's also clear at the local level, where matters once thought settled, such as local governments' authority to regulate property to protect the environment, are hotly debated.

I can't help you with those debates, but I can give you the correct answer to that troublesome question, "What gives you the right?" Here's the answer: "The people of this community have set the goals that this commission follows. And as long as we follow those goals, *that* gives us the right."

Probably at no time in modern history has it been more important for local officials to actively seek the public's participation. That's because the old consensus under which localities operated — the "power structure" of hometown business leaders, accommodating politicians, and a deferential public — has broken down.

In most places there is no more power structure to quietly enforce the rules. Your formal authority, as you've no doubt learned, is weak. Rule as you wish; your decisions can always be appealed. As a result, if you want to be a leader, and an important source of guidance for your community, you must do more than just attend meetings and follow procedure. You have to gain the "consent" of the people.

Fortunately, there are ways of generating this legitimacy. From visioning to collaborative task forces to citizen advisory panels, there are a multitude of methods for

bringing people together to work on issues. Whichever way you choose, make sure these elements are included:

- **The Right Information.** The information you supply to your citizens panels should be as objective as possible. People have an ear for hidden agendas today, and they're deeply suspicious of being manipulated.

YOU MUST DO MORE  
THAN JUST ATTEND  
MEETINGS AND FOLLOW  
PROCEDURE.  
YOU HAVE TO GAIN  
THE "CONSENT" OF  
THE PEOPLE.

But being objective doesn't mean dumping information and asking others to make sense of it. What you want from your groups are clearly thought-out goals. To get that, you have to supply information that emphasizes choices and consequences.

You'll know you've succeeded if the citizens recommend higher goals and tougher choices than you would have made. You've failed if they come back saying yes to everything.

- **The Right Process.** People from diverse backgrounds don't walk in the door thinking alike. Participants need time to learn about each other and agree on broad goals before plunging into detailed decisions.

One way corporate team-builders bring groups together is by discussing past and present conditions before setting goals for the future. This is a carefully considered sequence. Only when a group reaches a consensus about the events of the past does it move to present problems. Only when it agrees about the present does it talk about

the future. The point is to let groups come to agreement on less contentious subjects — and learn to trust one another — before tackling the hardest problems.

- **The Right People.** Many officials who are new to involving the public are fearful of "stacked panels" dominated by dissidents. That's why your recruiting efforts are so important. Your job is to find a cross-section of the public — not just leaders, but average citizens willing to help out their community.

But be careful not to make the opposite mistake and stack the panel with friends and admirers. Your goal is to generate legitimacy and reduce public skepticism. A panel representing only one point of view — or one part of the community — doesn't do that.

This isn't the heroic image of leadership, the one we associate with Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, the man who stands alone on principle — a leader, curiously, with no followers. Maybe it's a sign that we live in a post-heroic age, but the model that works better today is Andy Griffith, the quiet, reasonable sheriff of Mayberry. A little dull, perhaps, but patient, popular, and highly effective.

And notice one important detail: Andy Griffith, unlike Gary Cooper, doesn't wear a gun. When you have the town behind you, you don't need one. ♦

*Otis White is editor of Community Leadership Quarterly, a newsletter about civic leadership skills, and president of The Consensus Group, a firm that helps governments, non-profits and corporations build public support for new projects and initiatives. He can be reached at: P.O. Box 1687, Decatur, Georgia 30031-1687; (404) 371-9534. This is the final column in Otis White's four-part series on community leadership and planning commissions.*

