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The Communications Problem

A favorite cartoon editorial of mine is one entitled "The Communications Problem." The first panel depicts a three-seated swing fastened by two ropes to a tree limb, with the caption underneath: "As the architect understood it." The second panel shows the same tree with a one-seated swing hanging from the same limb by three ropes, and reads: "As the engineer designed it." In the third panel, two ropes are tied around the tree trunk with the seat on the ground: "As the draftsman drew it." And so it goes, through captions reading: "As the spec writer saw it"; "Final staff decision"; and then: "What the customer wanted." This last panel shows one rope looped over a limb and the other end knotted through an old used tire!

The Essence of Communication

For me, that cartoon clarifies at a glance my belief that the single-most important skill to develop in any business and community relationship is the ability to establish rapport—to enter someone else's world and make them feel that you understand them, that you have a strong common bond. Rapport is the essence of successful communication.

As the metal finishing sector of the U.S. EPA's Common Sense Initiative (CSI) continues to grow—with pilot projects in regions, states and municipalities—the ability to establish rapport is one of the most important skills needed by all industry members to achieve the stronger connection with others in this community confidence-building and regulatory reform process. To be good community members, we need the ability to form powerful common bonds and relationships built on responsiveness. The skills needed to achieve this connection with others are not only

important to community consensus in CSI projects—rapport also makes our daily business activities simpler, easier and more enjoyable.

Building a Stronger Connection

How do we build a stronger connection? One way is to create or discover things in common. By creating commonality with others, we establish a rapport. This commonality may be based on similar interests, personal associations or shared beliefs. The most popular method to do this is to exchange information about each other through words. Studies have shown, however, that only seven percent of what is communicated between people is transmitted through actual words. Approximately 38 percent is transmitted through the tone of voice, and the greatest percentage of communication—55 percent—is a result of physiology, or body language. Facial expressions, gestures, quality and type of movements of the person delivering a communication provides us with much more about what is being said than do the words themselves.

We can create a common physiology with others by developing our observation skills and personal flexibility. The process known as "mirroring" allows an individual to achieve a high degree of rapport by creating a common physiology. In other words, the least we should expect from each other in this relationship-building process, both within our communities and within our industry, is mutual respect.

Rapport = Trust

To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world, and must use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.

Building good relationships builds good reputations, which leads to the ultimate goal—trust!

During CSI meetings over the past two years, I have observed industry leaders from the metal finishing sector effectively use these communications skills to establish mutual trust among federal, state and municipal regulatory agency leaders, as well as between environmental and citizen group leaders. Considering the diversity among those sitting at the CSI table, the success achieved through the rapport of these leaders is remarkable.

Common sense regulatory change is essential for U.S. industry to compete in the world market. Our future and the future of our children is at stake. With 55 percent of communication dependent on direct, face-to-face contact, mutual trust among these leaders is sustained through regularly attended CSI meetings. Budgets at all levels continue to shrink, and foreign competition relentlessly squeezes our industry, so we must ensure adequate funding for continued CSI success. The foundation of the CSI was the Sustainable Industries Project, and all industry sectors must continue to support projects to achieve that goal.

How Do We Solve the Problem?

As the U.S. shifts from less federal to greater state and local government, it becomes increasingly important that we build a stronger connection through rapport with our own communities. Each of us is an industry ambassador who must help solve "the communications problem" within our own community. Meet and create commonality with your community leaders, citizen groups and local regulators. Listen to their ideas, share views, establish rapport, achieve consensus through environmental projects ... and build trust. P&SF