Dealing with an Angrier Public—Part II

By Lawrence Susskind & Patrick Field

In the first part of this article published in the Summer 2012 issue of *ACResolution Magazine*, we noted that the principles we proposed in our 1996 book, *Dealing with an Angry Public*, have been adopted and used successfully by corporations and governments around the world. Yet the public seems to be angrier than ever. We identified three factors that seem to explain that increased anger. In this follow up, we discuss these factors in a bit more detail and offer what we hope will be useful prescriptions.

DISTRUST OF SCIENCE

First, even as science makes amazing advances, the public seems to trust science and scientists less than ever, and reliance on science and expert advice as a basis for public decision making is under attack. Two related trends account for this change. First, while for much of American history scientific and technological advances were associated with progress in the economy and in American life—from the railroads to automobiles, radios and televisions, freeways, and the moon launch—that began to change in the 1960s. With the rise of the environmental movement, the scientific community began raising the alarm about the downside of technological progress. At the same time what had been seen as a great technological achievement, the development of nuclear power, instead began to look like a great source of danger. Science news increasingly became news of problems and risks, including some that seemed to threaten our health, prosperity, or even our continued existence.

As scientists published a seemingly never-ending stream of reports describing the extinction of numerous sub-species, the introduction of new compounds posing health risks, and, riskiest of all, changes in the climate caused by our continued reliance on fossil fuels, public tolerance for them dropped. At the same time, scientists became increasingly involved in policy controversies, taking positions on political and social issues. For much of the public, science is just one more interest group, trying to advance its own interests in a partisan way. The result is the loss of confidence in scientific experts and expertise.

Without some kind of independent and methodologically grounded approach to sorting out what we know as a society, we are left with only partisan debates informed by values, beliefs, and interests. Those debates can be won as readily through an ability to manipulate public understanding through the media as through valid data and sound reasoning, which further undermines trust in science.

DECLINE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Second, the "bowling alone" trend identified by Robert Putnam has accelerated. We associate less and less with people whose experience, socio-economic background, values and opinions differ from ours One of the central ingredients of democracy is tolerance. Yet we seem to have given up on this vital democratic behavior, and our social arrangements increasingly don't require us to have it. We live separately, work separately, vacation separately, and opinionate in a thousand blogosphere echo chambers of our own particular choosing. It becomes easier to dismiss viewpoints we don't share,

and to allow our own opinions to move toward the extremes. If the choice of public policy is seen only as a matter of values-based opinion rather than informed by some kind of mediating mechanism we become untethered from joint conclusions and joint action. People with different opinions live in separate worlds, policies with which we disagree aren't just unfortunate—they are violations or betrayals of the truth. It's understandable for people who feel that way to be angry.

ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC ANXIETY

Third, and perhaps most important, a great many people suffer from a deep anxiety triggered by broad demographic shifts and a swiftly changing economy. According to the U.S. census, median income for working-age households fell from $61,574 to $55,276 between 2000 and 2010—a decline of roughly $6,300 or 10 percent. A 2011 study by the Congressional Budget Office found that the top 1 percent of households gained about 275% after federal taxes and income transfers during the past 30 years. From 1992 to 2007 the top 400 earners in the U.S. saw their income increase 392%. This compares to a 65% increase for the next 19 percent, just under a 40% increase for the next 60 percent, and just an 18% increase in fifteen years in the real income of the bottom fifth of all households. Most people are unable to make sense of the causes of their suffering, which makes the future look very frightening. They can see that things have changed for the worse, but they don't hear explanations for the changes that they can understand and they don't know how to protect themselves. It is easy to conclude that the changes are the fault of bankers, government, immigrants, or some other powerful and alien force, and to respond with anger.

So what should we do? We believe that the solution lies in acting in a trustworthy fashion, sharing information, and engaging in joint fact-finding and collaborative problem-solving--the essential core of our six principles. We have to intensify and expand our commitment to these forms of collaborative problem-solving. If people don't trust science, science needs to earn their trust. If people don't encounter and therefore don't understand different points of view, they have to hear those points of view in ways they can understand. If people feel confused, frightened and powerless about their economic welfare, they need help understanding what they can do and how they can improve their economic welfare.

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First, we must ensure that scientific information regarding controversial issues enhances the ability of stakeholders to pursue their interests, and doesn't put limits on that ability. On-line dialogue, in-person events, and on-going public conversations should not be viewed as alternatives; rather, they should be seen as interlocking and reinforcing methods of democratic deliberation. Scientists must be trained to communicate with the lay public and

policy-makers, not by relying on science writers but by learning as part of their technical education how to present their ideas and integrate them with "local" or "indigenous" knowledge. We also ask that scientists be more careful to make explicit their underlying values and acknowledge the kinds of questions science can answer as well as those it cannot. Our research universities must spend more time and effort in engaging in action (i.e. applied) research so we can use what we know more effectively. A recent report by our colleagues at the Keystone Center outlines new procedures regarding the use of scientific advisory panels. Such panels must be willing to help citizens use science to clarify and advance their political interests, but in a way that opens their eyes to new ideas and counter-intuitive findings. On such major issues as climate change, we have to help the public think about what it can do rather than what it can't do. To wring our hands over possible climate change impacts fifty years from now is not useful; rather, we should focus on ways in which decisions that must be made now, about infrastructure investment and development patterns, for example, can minimize future risks while meeting short-term needs. We need to engage hunters and fisherman, for instance, in on-going data collection and monitoring efforts in areas they know best to help them see more clearly what is happening to resources over time due to climate change.

Second, we need to recreate common public spaces. The dispute resolution field should help to organize all kinds of problem-solving forums that enable people with very different views and experiences to generate informed agreement. We have to use social media and new technology to generate excitement about the benefits of such collaborative efforts. In our view, most of this should probably be done outside of formal government processes. Younger generations have grown increasingly skeptical of government's ability to solve problems. Furthermore, when we rely on government it is easy to avoid personal responsibility and thus polarize around policy and programmatic differences. Rather, our field needs to find ways to help non-government groups convene forums. Whether this involves the World Wildlife Fund bringing together multiple segments of society to build voluntary standards regarding sustainable seafood production, or gas and oil companies meeting with First Nations to explore joint ventures for joint gain, we need to improve the way stakeholders of all kinds can engage in collaborative problem-solving. Much of what they come up with may require government action to ensure implementation, but that doesn't mean that government should always be the convener of such efforts.

Third, our field must do a better job of incorporating the principles of mutual gain negotiation, alternative dispute resolution, and other similar consensus-building approaches into the way organizations and groups do business. It is not enough to succeed at one or another ad hoc effort. We must convince groups of all kinds that relying on voting and letting simple majorities decide what to do, is not as good as learning how to generate agreements that come as close as possible to meeting everybody's interests. We have a lot of capacity-building to do. Most people don't know that they should focus on interests rather than positions, or how to generate options for mutual gain. We can't just announce these principles, we have to develop organizational capacity to use them. In fact, we should make organizational development an essential part of what we do.

Fourth, we have to focus a lot more, as a profession, on economic (and not just environmental or fairness) issues. We should apply our skills and talent to difficult questions of tax policy, deficit reduction, job creation, bank regulation and public finance. As a field we are not sufficiently involved in how our economy works. Our field has done tremendous work in addressing labor-management, land use, natural resources, environment and energy conflicts, but not enough on key fiscal and tax policies. We should probably be partnering with other professions that are more knowledgeable in these areas. To ignore these issues because we don't happen to know a lot about them is to turn a blind eye to some of the most important issues of our time.

Finally, in a field that has become increasingly professionalized and specialized, we must not lose sight of the innate bridge-building capabilities that many people outside the field, from local officials to people of faith, possess. These are people who, regardless of their formal training, are able to listen patiently to those with opposing views and nudge them toward a common cause. They need our support. We must ensure that our field doesn't become so cloistered or arrogant that we fail to celebrate the dispute resolution talents of individuals from many different quarters.

Yes, this is a tall order. Helping citizens take science seriously and teaching scientist how to engage with stakeholders, creating problem-solving forums at every level, embedding our principles and practices in the basic operating norms of all kinds of groups and organizations, focusing on economic issues, and supporting naturally talented mediators from all walks of life, present formidable challenges. But, if we want to make a difference, this is what we will have to do.

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