

Selling Your Community on A Citizens' Review Board

Citizens' review boards are an increasingly common method of assuring agency and employee accountability to citizens. Recent articles have discussed whether or not a community should implement a citizens' review board. This article discusses the nuts and bolts of implementing a representative and effective board.

A Focus on Law Enforcement

The government department that usually gets the most attention at a point of critical contact with citizens is law enforcement. Consequently, this is the agency that is most likely to spark demands for citizens' review. Thirty of the 50 largest communities in the United States have instituted civilian review procedures for police departments; 15 of these procedures have been instituted since 1986. The trend clearly is established toward citizens' review boards. It is important to keep in mind, however, that law enforcement officials almost universally are opposed to review by citizens. In addition to police review boards, many communities have authorized boards to review other departments (for example, public works and leisure services) within their local government structures.

Primary research, discussions with practitioners, and a search of the literature indicate that part of police officials' opposition is based on a fear that citizens do not understand law enforcement and can not judge related personnel or their acts. Another factor in this opposition is the fear that law enforcement authority will be reduced. A

.....
One Example:

.....
Reviewing

.....
The Police

.....
Department

.....
**Susan Braunstein
and Mitchell Tyre**

less often stated, but more powerful, element of this opposition is a fundamental philosophical difference between law enforcement personnel and public administrators.

Most police officials traditionally look at the world and see legal and illegal acts and actors. This dichotomous view of the world is at odds with that of a review board, which sees matters from a different perspective. Any good communications specialist, who looks at the world and sees markets to persuade and inform, knows that boards supported by the stakeholders—the citizens, police, elected officials, unions—are inevitably more successful than those opposed by these groups.

Follow a Five-Point Model

One approach to consider in developing and selling an effective and representative citizens' review board is the following five-point model.

Point 1: Know your audience. The most important thing to know about your audience is that it is not one monolithic group. Rather, a local government administrator must consider at least five different audiences when planning a review board.

- The most obvious audience is the responsible government agencies and personnel. Elected officials, civic groups, and department heads all have a legitimate need to give input into the process of creation and the selection of board members.
- Special interest groups, such as the NAACP, labor organizations, and neighborhood groups, may feel that they are specially affected and consequently may want and need to have initial input.
- The police department is likely to generate the largest demand for an oversight board and likely to generate the most work for one. In addition, police groups traditionally are

Boards are seen

as threats by

the people they

review and as

saviors by

the community

members who

demand their

formation.

- opposed to the concept, often are well organized, and usually seek information and advice from agencies that already have faced the battle over review boards in their own jurisdictions.
- The community at large may wish to give input. Inviting such input may be handled through mandated public hearings, or it may be desirable to arrange for community meetings on the issue.
- A special interest group that influences all others and works on its own agenda is the media. Executive decisions need to be made on how, when, and where to involve media.

Point 2: Control the agenda. Do not let it control you. Ideally, it is the ad-

ministrator who should set the schedule for the implementation of an oversight board. In real life, it rarely works that way. In most cases, a review board is the product of an incident, often involving police use of force. The media give great play to the incident, and the citizens demand additional accountability from law enforcement. The media and noisy members of the community take control of the process and, ultimately, of the product because they control the time frame. By speeding the process, they limit deliberations and severely curtail access by all interested members of the community.

In many cases, boards are seen as threats by the people they review and as saviors by the community members who demanded their formation. In a great many cases, however, once the publicity dies down, the boards continue to exist but cease to perform any significant reviewing. In some circumstances, they continue to deal with individual cases but without addressing the larger policy issues that are of paramount concern to the community.

The only reliable preventive measures that a prescient administrator can take are three:

- Institute a review board before a trigger incident arises.
- Plan on including all interested parties.
- Welcome feedback.

Point 3: Perception is reality. This is the most important concept in communications and the most difficult one to realize for people committed to particular ideas or goals.

It does not matter what you mean to do.

It does not matter what you really do.

It only matters what they believe you do.

It has been said that advertisers and politicians are more interested in image than substance. That this statement is a half-truth, however, is

apparent to anyone who has ever worked in advertising or with a politician. Any advertiser knows that a slick campaign will sell a product once, but if the product does not deliver, consumers will not purchase it again. What good advertisers and politicians know is that image is not more important than substance; rather, it is the context in which substance exists. Public administrators also can manage image, sculpt perception, so that good ideas get a fair hearing in the marketplace.

Administrators should realize that starting a review board before there is a public outcry for one will increase the public perception of the fairness of the governmental entity, affected departments, and manager.

Remember, perception is reality.

Point 4: Do your research. If a local government manager controls the

time frame for the review board, he or she will have time to do the research that will make the board task-effective and cost-effective. It is not necessary to invent a review from scratch to suit your constituents. It makes more sense for a manager, management staff, and departments to come up with an original proposal by customizing existing models. This local version then is presented to all the audiences for their input and revision. Managers who control the original proposal will profit from others' experience, will reduce the amount of time needed to put together a successful package, and are likely to reduce squabbling among special interest groups.

Another way to do research is to rely on specialists. A consultant with expertise in the field often will know the specific outcomes when similar proposals were implemented else-

where. They know, for example, that rank-and-file police opposition to oversight boards can sink such boards before they get past the formative stages. Experts also know and can prove, however, that review boards are not harsher on police than are other police officers. In fact, citizens are far easier on officers than are their own departments. Such proof from experts, when shared with affected parties early on, can turn the tide of departmental opposition.

On the other hand, when board members are truly representative of the community, and when their findings are accurately covered by the media, board conclusions that are aligned with the findings of the department are likely to be accepted by the community.

Point 5: Sell to your target market.

The basic steps in market research for a new product are to find out what people want and then to give it to them. If a review board is a new product that a manager is trying to sell the community, he or she needs to ask what the community wants from such a review.

Primarily, such ideas as review boards fail for one, or both, of two reasons. Either the media and citizens respond to a crisis with insufficient or faulty planning. Or the review board does not do what its proponents believed it would.

The whole give-and-take process of consensus building in a properly staged campaign for an oversight board demands that citizens educate their elected officials and their public administrators about their needs and desires. Equally important, the process demands that administrators educate their audiences about each other and about realistic goals. ■

Susan Braunstein, associate professor, Barry University, Miami, Florida, and Mitchell Tyre, chief of police, Juno Beach, Florida, are consultants in public administration issues, based in Stuart, Florida.