

Public Communication: Engaging Citizens in the Nuclear Conversation - 11250

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ABSTRACT

What is the dialogue that will engage public citizens in recognizing – and participating in – a new era of nuclear energy? The basic elements of productive interaction are conversations that (a) create closure of the past, (b) initiate a new possibility, (c) support a dialogue for understanding, and (d) create new agreements for performance. These four elements can be assembled to construct a dialogue that will help people discuss, learn, and develop new ideas for an increasingly likely nuclear future, as well as new perspectives, a resurgence of learning, and greater intellectual awareness and expression regarding nuclear energy.

INTRODUCTION

Successful interactions are the result of a successful design of the conversation, to clarify our intentions for the engagement and its outcomes and to recognize (and perhaps upgrade) our relationship with the audience. A productive interaction will include the use of four specific types of conversation that (a) outline a new future; (b) engage people in developing the ways to accomplish that future; (c) establish agreements for action and results that will make the new future a reality; and (d) complete past mistakes, misunderstandings, and oversights so people can be open to new possibilities and promises. To ensure a productive conversation, we start with the “completion” conversation, to clear the air and establish a commitment to honesty and partnership in the interactions.

DESIGN A SUCCESSFUL CONVERSATION

A dialogue between the scientific-technology community and the public is always a challenge: different concepts, vocabularies, and information can create condescension on one side and mistrust on the other. In the face of these differences, the natural course of action is that each side attempts to get the other side to see, understand, and accept their point of view, hoping to gain consent: “If we can just get them to understand X, then we can accomplish Y.” Although the logic of this approach seems appropriate, the result is that the parties end up engaging in monologues rather than dialogues – they end up talking past each other rather than with each other.

The Intention for Engagement

To be effective, a dialogue must be designed with a clear intention for what is to be accomplished. One way to clarify the intent of a “citizen engagement conversation” is to use the three OECD categories of public policy citizen engagement:

1. Do we want to deliver information and education in a predominantly one-way interaction? If so, we must ensure that the information is complete, objective, reliable, relevant, easy to find, and easy to understand.

2. Do we want to obtain feedback on the information in a two-way consultation? If so, we need to establish clear goals and rules defining the limits of the exercise and the obligation to account for the use of citizen input.
3. Do we want to develop active participation with citizen-partners proposing decision options and shaping the dialogue? If so, we must provide sufficient time and flexibility to allow for the emergence of new ideas and proposals by citizens, as well as mechanisms for their integration into decision-making processes.

The Intention for Outcome

Regardless of our intention to engage people, controversial conversations can polarize people around positions of right-wrong and good-bad, inflaming strongly held opinions and even preventing rational and productive dialogue. In this situation, two conversational tendencies must be balanced to keep from being pulled into one camp or another: problem-solving and future-building. If the intended outcome is to solve problems, one must be aware of another commitment that may be present: the intention to create a future in which current problems have been resolved, bypassed, or transcended.

Too much emphasis on problems and problem-solving risks an escalation into attack-and-defend interactions as people look to place or avoid responsibility for the problems or question the ability of those involved to solve the problems. Too much future-building risks losing focus with an appearance of Pollyanna ignorance or idealism where people can lose touch with, or fail to appreciate, the reality of new possible breakthroughs. Problem-solving is always useful, but it must share the conversational stage with a commitment to future-building. The challenge is creating the appropriate balance in light of the intent of the “citizen engagement conversation”.

Our Regard for the Audience

A final element in designing a dialogue with the public is to recognize the regard we have for those to whom we are speaking. People rarely enter a conversation without bringing along and being shaped by what they think of the people in their audience. Who do we consider them to be? Do we see them as allies or adversaries? Do we believe them to be open, closed, or resistant to the subject of our conversation? Do we know them to be well informed and thoughtful, or do we think they are reactionary and seriously short of facts?

Our beliefs and expectations about others influence the way we interact with them. The results we produce with those interactions are likely to confirm our expectations, but may be ineffective in accomplishing our intentions for creating a new partnership with new thinking on all sides.

A designed conversation requires giving thought to the engagement intent, balancing the interest in outcomes between problem-solving and future-building commitments, and recognizing (and perhaps upgrading) our expectations regarding other players in the engagement.

DESIGN A PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION

A productive interaction can be designed to achieve the intended results. Accomplishment of any intentional change depends on the effective use of four different types of conversations (Ford and Ford, 1995; 2009): initiative, understanding, performance, and closure.

Initiative Conversations

An Initiative Conversation is a proposal to create a new future, with the intention of making that future a reality. What makes an Initiative Conversation unique is not that it is a way of *talking about* starting something. It actually *does* start something. The speaker points to a desirable future, and makes it seem worthwhile enough that people are attracted to participating in making that idea a reality.

An Initiative Conversation is an active and intentional approach to the future, not simply a “good idea” or suggestion. It outlines what is to be accomplished or achieved, by when it can be accomplished, and includes a reason or value for doing it. This gives everyone a big-picture sense of what the future can be, when it is possible, and why it is desirable. When an Initiative Conversation is effective, many people who grasp the vision and the opportunity will join in activities and events designed create the new and desirable future.

Understanding Conversations

An Understanding Conversation is a dialogue in which the ideas, reactions, objections, and criticisms of participants are solicited, listened to, and considered. These conversations recognize that people are meaning-makers: sometimes we accept the meaning that others give to us, and sometimes we make up meanings without testing our interpretations against reality in any way. In Understanding Conversations, we work to clarify the meanings and implications of an initiative for all parties and perspectives.

Questions are asked and answered truthfully, factually, and completely. Although Understanding Conversations are conducted with respect to a particular Initiative Conversation, they focus primarily on identifying who will be involved in creating the new future, where the resources could come from, and how the goals and objectives might be accomplished. As a result, plans and schedules are drafted and modified, roles and responsibilities are identified and considered, and possible technologies and methodologies are reviewed and examined. Although these conversations are informative, their real purpose is to ensure that participants have an opportunity to engage in a genuine discussion, voices are heard, and resulting plans are the product of the conversation rather than of one side or the other “winning” approval for their predetermined case.

Performance Conversations

A Performance Conversation is one in which people make requests, promises, and agreements for actions and/or results. Requests are framed to obtain a commitment that someone will take a specific action, or produce a specific result, by a certain time. The acceptance of a request constitutes a promise, and establishes an agreement between the parties. In an effective performance conversation, the requested actions, results, and timelines are discussed completely

so that all parties are clear about the conditions of the agreement, and have confidence that it will be performed as agreed.

Closure Conversations

A Closure Conversation brings about a completion of past issues or concerns so they will not operate as a constraint or limitation in having discussions or creating agreements in current and future actions. Four methods for having conversations that complete past-based barriers to communication have been dubbed “the four A’s: acknowledgement, appreciation, apology, and amendment.

Acknowledgement involves recognizing the facts of some past event or situation: something happened, and some state of the world exists as a result. For example, if I am ten minutes late to a meeting, I can acknowledge the fact by stating, “I am late.” This conversational act makes it clear to others that I know what they know – I am late – and it removes any uncertainty about whether I am aware of the situation and the possible effects it may have had on those in the meeting. Acknowledgement of the facts is appropriate when something has been done or not done, or said or not said, that may have caused effects for others that could carry negative consequences into future interactions.

Appreciation is the conversation that recognizes the value of other people. The intent of appreciation is to make it known to others that you see and credit them for what they have said, done, and/or contributed. It allows people to notice what they have accomplished, and gives them the recognition for something that can allow them to turn to the future rather than holding on to past actions and results. To be effective, appreciation has to be authentic and cannot be used as a manipulation, as in “buttering someone up” to get him to do something.

Apology is an admission of a mistake or misunderstanding that allows other people to change their negative interpretation of an event or interaction to a more positive and generous interpretation. Apologies can provide a way to enable other people to recover or save face in a situation they may otherwise believe to be a failure or disappointment. Apologies help people to let go of a particular viewpoint and open up to new thoughts or ideas. For example, when I am late for a meeting, in addition to acknowledging that I am late, I can apologize for causing meeting attendees to worry, and for causing an inconvenience to their discussion.

Amendment is a conversation to identify past broken agreements (regardless of who broke them) and to restore trust and credibility for all participants. Agreements, whether explicit or understood, are broken all the time. Any promise, or even a reasonable assumption of performance, creates an agreement that involves both of us. When that agreement is not kept as expected, the result is disappointment (and worse) that can linger to affect future interactions. Broken agreements that go unrecognized often erode confidence, credibility, and trust on all sides. To amend a broken agreement, start by recognizing that a particular agreement has been broken, report on the status of that agreement, identify what needs to be done now to “make things right”, and recommit to the agreement (or a revised version of it) that will be honored in the future. This conversation allows people to accept that mistakes have been made in the past,

they are not going to be glossed over, and future agreements will be treated with respect and honest communication.

A productive conversation with the public will include each of the four conversations in a way that will satisfy the intent of the engagement. The sequence of the conversations, and the amount of time devoted to each, will vary with the intent. For example, using the three OECD categories of public policy citizen engagement:

- a) If the intent of the engagement is to deliver information and education in a predominantly one-way interaction, Understanding Conversations will predominate to introduce an intention and provide information, with the amount of dialogue limited to the desired time and topics.
- b) If the intent is to obtain feedback on the information in a two-way consultation, then Understanding and Closure Conversations will dominate to build a stronger dialogue and to complete issues and perspectives that are held over from a past that can be completed.
- c) If the intent is to develop active participation with citizen-partners, then all four conversations will be used extensively. Performance Conversations will be an important part of the conversation to establish new performance relationships among participants and presenters to collaborate in new ways.

Regardless of the intent, Initiative Conversations will always be used. Keeping the public aware of the envisioned future, the timeframe for its desired achievement, and why it is worthwhile to accomplish needs to be refreshed frequently.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING CITIZENS IN THE NUCLEAR CONVERSATION

Engaging citizens in a productive interaction for a new nuclear future can be done through a designed conversation that is implemented with the four productive conversations. A template for such engagements is to start with closure conversations, followed by initiative and understanding conversations. Depending on the intent of the engagement, performance conversations can be used to generate agreements for action. All engagements, regardless of intent, should also conclude with closure conversations.

OPEN WITH CLOSURE TO COMPLETE THE PAST

One way to characterize the current relationship between the scientific-technology community and the public regarding nuclear energy is one of “resistance”. A relationship of resistance is one in which there is conflict and confrontation between the respective parties with an intent of slowing, stopping, or thwarting the movement of the other.

Most contemporary views on resistance, particularly resistance to change, consider resistance to be solely a function of the “other” party, i.e., resistance is located over there, with “them”, and has little or nothing to do with me or us. In these views, “they” resist because they don’t understand, don’t see the bigger picture, are misinformed, are or have been misled. The proposed remedy, in these views, is that the path to overcoming resistance is to educate and inform the opposition or to co-opt them into the decision making process so that they can see what is really going on, come to understand, and change their point of view.

Seeing the public as “resistant”, however, can be dysfunctional if we alienate potential partners by relating to them as obstacles to be overcome rather than as potential resources to make an initiative stronger, smarter, and more acceptable. Although effective in some cases, attempting to overcome nuclear resistance through education suffers from three primary limitations:

- (1) It ignores the possibility that those advocating nuclear power may have contributed to the very resistance they encounter by virtue of their own prior deeds;
- (2) It fails to recognize that resistance can be very useful feedback that can actually improve an initiative; and
- (3) It implies that more communication is necessarily better, thereby overlooking differences in the types of conversations that constitute the communication.

Viewing resistance as coming only from “over there in them” is inaccurate and simplistic. It leads to the belief that they must alter their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, and that we would be successful in our endeavors if not for the irrational and self-serving actions of people who seem to be blocking or deflecting us. The way people respond to a proposal will, in fact, depend on two things: (1) our current behaviors and communications, and (2) our historical interactions and relationships with one another. If, in their view, we have betrayed them in some way in the past, or if they believe we have misled them by withholding or misrepresenting information, they will be suspicious, skeptical, and distrusting of our current initiatives. Our credibility will be compromised, and they will question and challenge what we say, even if it is factually accurate.

Research on trust indicates that when there is either a real or perceived betrayal of trust, we can restore trust only if the betrayal is acknowledged, repairs and apologies are made, and a new promise for a more honest future is offered. For example, when we say something is safe or economical and it turns out later not to be, people require a substantive Closure Conversation in order to be able to restore a productive dialogue with reduced “resistance”.

Engaging a resistant public, therefore, is an opportunity for feedback only if we are willing to consider that our past and current actions and communications have contributed to their current reactions. Resistance *is* feedback, and, like all feedback, it can be used to improve the design and implementation of the plans we are working to develop and the goals we desire to reach. In particular, resistance can be used, if we are willing to listen, for learning what is missing in our communications and which type of productive conversations we need to use.

Address the Past

Citizens have memories and access to all types of information, facts, and opinions. Among those memories are all the disparities between promises made and realities observed. Any engagement with the public on the future of nuclear power is likely to be held hostage to public perceptions of the past. To create more open listening, start the engagement with a Closure Conversation that owns the nuclear past – the good, the bad, and the ugly – without getting defensive or justifying what happened.

Today’s widespread concern about economic misrepresentations in many sectors of government, business, and industry recommends that there be a special focus on using Closure Conversations to acknowledge, appreciate, apologize, and amend those elements in the nuclear past. Another

area of nuclear past that may require Closure Conversations is nuclear energy's Achilles heel: radioactive waste. All the arguments for meeting an increasing base load demand, improving nuclear economics and supply security, and addressing the urgency of climate change does not dampen the resistance to the public's perceived threat of radioactive materials near their homes, schools, and communities. In 2007, Tomihiro Taniguchi, the deputy director general for nuclear safety and security at the International Atomic Energy Agency said at a conference in Bern, Switzerland, "The failure to properly address waste disposal in the first decades of nuclear energy development has left a legacy of doubt in the minds of the public and politicians over its overall safety", and, "If this doubt is not ameliorated soon, it could well lead to all the ambitious plans to expand the use of nuclear power on a global scale being significantly delayed."

Nuclear agencies and industries can be straightforward about past mistakes, misunderstandings, and broken agreements in a way that acknowledges the facts and appreciates the public's ability to observe and understand those facts. Applying the methodology of Closure Conversations to reduce mistrust and open new dialogue can help create new perspectives, launch a resurgence of learning, and provide for greater intellectual awareness and expression regarding nuclear energy. The benefits of honesty and completion can be expected to reduce resistance and deepen a productive partnership with the public citizens who share our interest in a viable future.

INITIATIVE: SPEAK THE POSSIBILITY

The Initiative Conversations for a new nuclear future are rich with possibility. Speak about what can be done, when it can be done, and why it will make a better future for all of us. Describe the new future that is now possible and why it matters for citizens, environments, and economies. Introduce the players: who will be working on various aspects of the new future, and how these groups will work together. Brag a little bit about the knowledge, talents, and expertise of the people who work in the nuclear sciences and technologies, and the integrity of the people who work with nuclear safety, management, and governance. Speak the future, and share the possibility, creating new ways to communicate to a changing dynamic of public interests and concerns.

UNDERSTANDING: BE PREPARED TALK STRAIGHT

Citizens have new methods of ensuring their voices are heard today. Today's local citizens, special interest groups, and competitive interests are using increasingly sophisticated advocacy tactics and strategies that can engage everyone in a geographic area who has the time and interest to participate. Land use planning, for example, a process by which citizens decide who gets what, is based on citizen advocacy, not professional lobbying.

In the face of the evolving capacity for mobilizing the public voice, authors Saint, Fox, and Flavell (7) say that approving agencies at municipal, county, state, and federal levels are more likely to err on the side of doing nothing, thus slowing down planned land-use changes no matter how persuasive the logic, science, or economics. As a result, they maintain that "preparation is indispensable" when taking a land-use proposal to citizens, saying, "Land use politics will play a major role in determining our energy future."

Prepare to address citizen and special interest concerns before they become an insurmountable block for the elected officials who are reviewing plans. The basis for a new nuclear future needs to be articulated, with good preparation to address the objections, ideas, and questions that may arise.

Drivers of a New Nuclear Future

There are seven topics that may be considered as drivers for a new nuclear future. Most are familiar to well-informed citizens, but facts may be still be few and opinions strong. If these drivers provide the basis for expanding the role of nuclear power, they can be deployed for a renewed commitment to nuclear energy and as a foundation for both designing an Initiative Conversation and framing the associated Understanding Conversations.

1. **Base Customer Demand:** People and businesses use power. The “base load demand” is the amount of power needed to meet the “reasonable expectations” of customer power-users, and usually varies from hour to hour in most residential, business, and industrial areas. The abundant energy that has been available in our lifetime has altered our understanding of “reasonable expectations” of energy: we expect to have what we want to have, and our wants are growing.
2. **Increasing energy demand:** Global population growth in combination with industrial development is expected to double our electricity consumption by 2030. In addition to this incremental growth, an increasing shortage of fresh water will call for energy-intensive desalination plants, electric vehicles will increase electricity demand, and hydrogen production for transport purposes will need large amounts of electricity.
3. **Climate change:** The dangers and effects of global warming and climate change suggest that the use of fossil fuels must be reduced and replaced by low-emission sources of energy such as nuclear energy.
4. **Economics:** Several studies show that nuclear energy is the most cost-effective of the available base-load technologies. The economic benefits of nuclear power are expected to increase further as carbon emission reductions are encouraged.
5. **Improvements in Manageability:** The Nuclear Renaissance Act (S.3618) gathers into a single bill many nuclear energy provisions found in previously introduced legislation as well as provisions not found in other bills, including proposals to establish several offices within DOE to handle nuclear energy issues and a new government corporation to assume responsibility from DOE for implementing the disposition of used nuclear fuel.
6. **Improved Safety:** Industry-wide data compiled by the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO), a utility organization that monitors nuclear plant safety and operations, shows a dramatic improvement in nuclear plant performance over the past 30 years. Among the changes is a reduction “to nearly zero” of the average number of significant reactor events, especially unplanned reactor shutdowns.
7. **Security of Supply:** The abundance of naturally occurring uranium and the large energy yield from each ton of uranium gives nuclear power a security of supply by not being vulnerable to interrupted deliveries such as those of oil and gas.

Yes, But...

Engaging the public in productive interactions regarding a nuclear future based on the seven drivers will prompt challenges to and questions about the validity of those drivers. In a sense, the public will say “Yes, but...” thereby creating the opportunity for understanding conversations to engage them in discussions about the nuclear options, plans, and opportunities. Questions that support strong engagement will relate to these drivers while speaking to the concerns and questions of public citizens:

1. **Base Customer Demand:** Is nuclear power *really* the only readily available large-scale alternative to fossil fuels for production of continuous, reliable supply of electricity? Can't renewable energy contribute substantially to base load power demand?
2. **Increasing energy demand:** Is nuclear power the solution to the world's increasing energy demands in the face of catastrophic climate change, or is it an unsafe, unprofitable diversion from truly clean energy?
3. **Climate change:** How will the nuclear power industry support a carbon price that is coupled with other policies for industry development? A price on carbon would allow the market to fund the best technologies, as the market sees it, but who decides what business ventures qualify for incentives?
4. **Economics:** The nuclear plant construction cost overruns of the 1970s and 1980s left traces of skepticism in the public memory. These memories are aggravated by an economic downturn. How much will this nuclear future cost, and how will we pay for it?
5. **Improvements in Manageability:** Are the decisions to build plants or construct waste storage facilities a product of sound judgment, or are they industry-purchased and politically manipulated by industry lobbyists? Are the cost and timeline estimates going to be managed too, or will business interests be making the decisions about expenditure of public funds? Can citizens trust the government to regulate nuclear power after they have seen the government handing of natural and environmental disasters in the Gulf of Mexico?
6. **Improved Safety:** Improvements in nuclear reactor safety are largely invisible to the public. The memory of past nuclear accidents, however, remains in the community's lore. Even people too young to recall Three Mile Island (1979) or Chernobyl (1986) have heard the stories and often carry the outdated beliefs of nuclear power's threat to public safety.
7. **Security of Supply:** Doesn't uranium mining expose workers and nearby farms, communities, recreational areas and watersheds to unacceptable levels of radiation? How will these materials be contained and disposed to protect people?

Understanding Conversations are the basis for developing a strong public conversation with access to facts, opinions, and ideas. A recognition of different points of view does not need to become contentious, and in fact can contribute to a perception of inclusion and integrity on the part of nuclear power advocates.

PERFORMANCE: MAKE AGREEMENTS FOR RESULTS

Promises for safety, costs, and timetables are always risky in that they cannot be totally controlled to avoid failure. That is not a good enough excuse to avoid making promises, however. With the ability to have Closure Conversations, we are able to acknowledge broken

agreements, deal with the consequences in physical terms and in the public trust, and recommit to a new agreement and a new partnership. The only thing worse than breaking a promise is not making one in the first place: public communications deserve public commitments.

Public communication for a fresh perspective on nuclear energy will necessitate making requests and making promises. In preparation, look for opportunities to offer for people to participate and contribute their ideas and resources. Create events and communication mechanisms for interaction that will help people stay in the conversation, even if their views are not totally congruent with the future you desire. Promise – and deliver – progress reports with updates on steps taken, problems solved. Provide responses to new offers, ideas, issues and concerns as they arise. Requests, promises, and agreements are the producers of actions, results, and changes.

CLOSURE AGAIN

Conclude all interactions with the public, especially those that did not go well, with an authentic Closure Conversation to:

- (1) Acknowledge whatever was accomplished or agreed to, and whatever remains on the list for future conversations;
- (2) Appreciate the people for their participation and contribution and for their willingness to engage in a challenging discussion;
- (3) Apologize for any mistakes or misunderstandings that arose during the meeting, and
- (4) Amend or update any agreements that will support or strengthen dialogue in future meetings.

This conversation cannot be gratuitous, but must be authentic to leave participants with the clear impression that you are straightforward, and you really do appreciate them and want to build a strong, productive, and effective public dialogue. These are the conversations that complete the interaction.

Engaging a potentially resistant public in a new conversation for nuclear energy is more likely to be a productive interaction when the conversation is designed and the four different types of conversations are used. The one possible template presented here shows how such an exchange might be designed to be both successful and productive. The reality of any public interaction, however, will be far messier than can be captured on paper, and will require a willingness to move from one of the four types of conversation to another as needed. When facilitating an Understanding Conversation, for example, and answering questions about the drivers of a “nuclear renaissance”, one may need to switch to Closure Conversations if an issue from the past arises. When the Closure Conversation is completed, you can return to the dialogue for understanding and engagement. Conversational design tools can provide a rich way to plan and prepare for engaging the public in creating a new future for nuclear energy.

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