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THE TRUSTED INFORMANT: SHOWING EMPATHY TO BUILD CREDIBILITY

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ABSTRACT – We can provide information to the public, but what if no one is listening? Public mistrust of nuclear industry representatives stands as a barrier to successful communication of factual information on health, safety, and environmental impacts of small reactors. In this paper I demonstrate with reference to social science and marketing research how empathy can help to gain trust and dispel misinformation when communicating with potential host communities and the broader public.

Introduction

As the small reactor industry moves forward, a key element of deployment success will be finding suitable site locations for first-of-a-kind (FOAK) small reactors. The commercial success of these reactors pivots on whether they can achieve economies of scale with a proven design. Achieving that first build, followed by the rapid deployment of several additional units, will be the proving grounds for Canadian industry leaders seeking to establish themselves in national and international markets.

In a number of industries, social factors are becoming increasingly influential for site selection. Community support for a project can help fast-track environmental impact assessments and other regulatory hurdles, avoiding costly delays. For the best chance at success, long-term planning for small reactors must now lay groundwork for successful partnerships with Canadian communities [1]. Although educated publics are more likely to support nuclear power [2], effective social outreach must go beyond education alone. Successful communication of factual information is itself dependent on a foundation of trust and mutual understanding. Empathy can play a key role in building this trust.

1. How Mistrust Perpetuates Misinformation

As prerequisites for systematic evaluation, a person must possess both sufficient motivation to consider an issue as well as the background knowledge necessary to process the information [3]. We want people, especially those living in potential host communities, to carefully consider all benefits and drawbacks using relevant and accurate information.

There are many excellent outreach initiatives in place to bring this information about nuclear to the public. But surveys of Canadians reveal widespread distrust of the nuclear industry: many do not view industry representatives as credible sources of information [4]. What happens when those who hear accurate information do not trust its source?

Mistrust presents a significant barrier to communication. This is because factual arguments alone cannot easily instil motivation and can only guarantee availability of information—not acceptance

of that information as accurate (Figure 1). Without first establishing a link of trust, capacity to dispel myths and convey helpful and accurate information to public audiences is limited.



Figure 1 Mistrust blocks the communication needed to inform thoughtful evaluation

2. Two Paths to Trust

To trust another person is to believe with confidence that they will not act in violation of our interests. Research on business-consumer interactions has studied the critical role of trust for building relationships. For example, mathematical modeling has established trust as a key pathway for communication to eventually result in positive (i.e. cooperative) outcomes [5].

One way that trust can be established is from past experience. If I see that someone's actions have repeatedly meshed well with my best interests, I might be confident that this pattern will continue. However, this route for gaining trust takes time, and first requires enough trust (or low enough initial risk) that people are willing to take a chance on a person or on an organization in the first place.

A second way to establish trust depends on our ability to understand—and thus predict—another person's behaviour and motivations. If I perceive that someone intimately understands my own point of view and—more importantly—has respect for my best interests, it is only natural for me to trust that they will act accordingly. The beginnings of this trust can form in an instant and are rooted in our social nature to connect with other human beings through empathy.

3. Understanding and Feeling Empathy

Empathy involves deep understanding of another person's emotional state. It is the ability "to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings … as if one were the other person" [6, pp. 210-211]. Empathetic corporations possess a strategic advantage for understanding consumer needs, supporting relationships, and building trust [7, 8]. In fact, empathy is *most* important for consumer satisfaction when initial trust is very low [9].

Empathy's ability to connect people is grounded in shared emotional experience. Facts and emotion are sometimes seen as polar opposites [2], but it is important to note that emotions are a natural human response to (perceived) situations. Even if an emotion springs from a misinformed assumption, the experience of feeling that emotion is still an entirely rational response—cause and effect—for the human brain. Dismissing nuclear opponents as "emotional" instead of rational thinkers is an oversimplification that hurts the industry's long-term objectives. In actual fact, careful evaluation of an issue involves *stronger* emotions than when one is persuaded without much thought [7]!

Feeling empathy includes a cognitive component (understanding) as well as an emotional component (feeling with another person) [6]. It requires that we set aside our own perspectives and even our background knowledge for a temporary moment. As if trying on someone else's shoes, we step into and consider the assumptions, values, and knowledge held by the other person. *How would I feel if I were this person, knew only what they know; and thought the way they think?* Only then can we bridge the gap between our opposing perspectives and acknowledge the other person's emotions as valid.

Bridging this gap has powerful benefits for the empathizer's social interactions. Empathy is necessary in order for diverse groups to identify common ground and form collective goals [10]. Furthermore, it lessens our innate tendency to feel prejudice against people with different viewpoints [11]. This makes empathy proactive: the ability to foresee, quickly apprehend, and relate to public concerns can facilitate a more measured and understanding response to negative, high-intensity public emotions.

4. Communicating and Demonstrating Empathy

Empathy helps us to understand other perspectives, but the greatest benefits come when we demonstrate this in a way that is visible to others. It is not our self-perception, but rather *consumer* perceptions of our empathy that predict future relationship trust [8, 9, 12]. This is especially important to consider when responding in highly charged situations.

Communication behaviour generally falls along a spectrum of instrumental versus expressive [13]. Communication is instrumental when used to obtain a specific goal. The speaker often appears calm and may engage in constructive debate or bargaining. Expressive communication, on the other hand, is done with the *singular* primary objective of being heard and understood. The speaker may sometimes express certain goals or make requests, but these are secondary. If the person does not feel that they are being listened to, absolutely no progress can be made. Attempts to reason or inform are ill-received because they hold little relevance to the true concern at hand.

Meeting this need to feel heard is best accomplished through active listening behaviours. These methods are effective even in crisis situations [13] and include conversational strategies like paraphrasing, asking for clarification, and offering to solve problems jointly. Furthermore, consumer perceptions of empathy are known to depend on the active listening skills of salespersons they encounter [12].

5. Conclusions

We have a responsibility to provide accurate information to the public. Empathetic communication cannot replace informational outreach, but the trust which empathy is shown to build can be an important pre-requisite to that information's acceptance. At a time when a fact-centric counterpoint might be ill-received and ignored by most, a visibly empathetic response could instead convey understanding and foster trust—especially for onlookers to the conversation. In situations calling for empathy and a deep understanding of the other person's perspective, the best questions to ask are driven by curiosity to understand, not rhetoric to make a point or counterargument.

A consistently empathetic approach to public communication requires forethought and rehearsal. Active listening rarely comes as an instinctive response, especially in conflict-prone sitations where we ourselves care deeply about the issue at hand. When practiced, however, empathy can enable us to demonstrate greater understanding, mitigate heated situations, convey accurate information with wider success, and inspire greater trust in industry for the long-term.

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