

Suggested Rules of Engagement

For any major employer in a one-industry town

1. Understand that your company, no matter how well intended, is a 900 pound gorilla in a small space that is bound to step on someone's toes.
2. Collaborate: When initiating any new or expanded facility, service, or important change in operations, don't wait for local government to contact the community regarding your proposal. Instead, reach out the community while your idea is still in its early development phase. Involve people from all walks of life in the design. Particularly, include those people who apparently don't like you. If all goes well, both you and the community will "own" the final design.
 "Front-loaded" design includes not only all relevant technical people, but also all relevant community people. Time and money spent at the front end saves more time and money at the community approval stage.
3. Never overstate your case. Instead offer accurate understatement; responsible citizens will hear it clearly.
4. Be permanently involved in the community in ways that don't directly serve the company. It's good for your employees' quality of life, makes you more attractive to prospective staff, and significantly increases the potential for community empathy next time you make a mistake.
5. Assume you will make mistakes, at least in the community's eyes. Know the spirit, intent, and goal of your response before mistakes are made.
6. Never seek PR points or try to improve your image. Such efforts generate suspicion. Instead, just be a good corporate citizen. Eventually, citizens will know it.
7. Make all the company's community-oriented efforts transparent. For example, when you do something for the community that also serves the company, say so.
8. Appoint community-relations people who can hear bad news and pass it along to the company.
9. Don't make excuses; state the facts. When the company makes any mistake, small or large, admit it immediately. In most cases, say why it happened and what you're doing to ensure it won't be repeated.
10. Be patient. If you've had an adversarial relationship with certain elements of the community, don't expect it to improve immediately just because you're doing the right thing in the right way. It takes time for citizens to stop regarding you as an adversary, no matter how good you've gotten.