

Communication

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COMMUNICATION AND TEAMWORK RELEVANT TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT RANGER OPERATIONS

Local government rangers provide a service to the community by the enforcement and administration of specific state legislation, regulations and local laws within the local community. This must be done in a fair and consistent manner with consideration and respect for all parties.

Communication is the vital link and means from which information is gathered, responses are made and procedures are activated. The resulting effect and outcomes are often a reflection of the quality and care of the communications. This has an additional bearing on the degree of response, understanding, level of stress and goodwill experienced by all parties.

Within the function of the Rangers Department the quality of the communication influences effectiveness and positive responses in several key areas:

- department function and teamwork;
- relating to the community and its issues;
- regulation, enforcing, education;
- providing, correlating and updating information with other local government departments and the council.

TEAMWORK

Initially it may appear much of the ranger's work involves one to one communication, however they still require, and rely on, the resources and support of their department and co-workers. Recognising the communities' needs will be best accomplished and served by a team that works together cohesively with focus, direction and positive energy, leads us to examine the components that make good teams:

- mutual respect;
- recognition and appreciation of individual differences and values;
- mutual trust and support;
- alignment of common goals and values;
- flexibility;
- personal acceptance of responsibility and accountability to the team;
- acknowledgment of abilities and achievement;
- being proactive.

In the creating of teams:

- clarify values and standards;
- identify goals, procedures and attitude;
- encourage involvement, input and participation;
- commit to values and goals;
- communicate values and goals;
- obtain feedback, confirmation and understanding;
- convert values to action;
- reassess, re-evaluate, redirect.

Be aware shared values align a team behind its vision and purpose. Belief in those values motivates and strengthens. Leading by example and personal belief are the greatest of motivators - 'it's not just talking the talk but walking the talk!'

Remember managing well when delegating or sharing new responsibilities is a skill that requires practice, time and individual interpretation before producing good results. Teams need support and recognition of their actions. It is important to treat individuals not necessarily the same but equably. Reassessment and refocussing is an ongoing part of the process.

As an individual perhaps ask yourself "what can I contribute to this situation or group?" Remember the power of the greatest waterfall is created by many tiny droplets that combine to cascade together!

COMMUNICATION

Communication allows for the exchange of ideas and information to assess the degree of understanding. However its effectiveness is reliant on how it is done, when it is done, the attitude with which it is done, the provision for ongoing process and the gauging of individual interpretation and response. Communication is not only what is said or written but what is not, the context, the tone, body language, clues, cues and signs that are expressed.

Communication is a two way process

The hardest and most critical part of communication is listening, listening and hearing. So often individuals are so busy trying to get their own point across they do not really listen or confirm their understanding. This is a valuable function of acknowledgment and respect for others:

- to listen one must attune;
- be open and allowing;
- when responding confirming your understanding;
- allow room for response;
- stay focussed, clear and calm;
- allow for differences in perception and viewpoint.

The skills of effective communication and relating to others are not only required for team or interdepartmental direction but are a fundamental requirement for dealing with the community and the public generally. Providing information or educating the community requires good, clear focused communication skills. There are even more specific skills for conflict resolution that would apply when dealing with complaints and the enforcing of acts, regulations and local laws.

The level of communication skills used in dealing with complaints and conflict has considerable bearing on the satisfaction of the outcome. This applies not only in the resulting action taken but in the attitudes and perception held by the community towards the rangers, the shire and the services they provide.

RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT

The very nature of a ranger's work means it is likely there will be times of conflicting interest and dispute. Whether it is internal or external there is a need to resolve differences in implementing act regulations and local laws that may be perceived negatively.

When dealing with conflict consider:

- initially trying to work for mutual satisfaction or benefit;
- look to possible alternative solutions;
- empathise - while still maintaining a steady consistent position with no more than appropriate assertiveness;
- do not respond to the angers and frustrations of others - acknowledge their feelings but do not reciprocate;
- assess the willingness to resolve or negotiate if that is an option;

- if there are limited options due to regulations and procedures, communicating the limitations with consideration, professionalism and respect are of utmost importance.

The exposure to conflict creates frustration and stress. It may also include being the object of anger or receiving abuse. It is most important that the ranger doesn't exacerbate or contribute to these negative expressions. Good control of emotions, tone, content of communication and body language are essential. Being able to effectively deal with resulting stress and emotion on a personal level is almost a requirement of the position. Realising that you are personally not the target of the anger or negative expressions is paramount.

Be aware that the ranger's uniform alone can be a symbol of unwanted authority and establishment. Look to the image you are portraying and the manner you adopt. Is it provocative or intimidating? Do excessive badges and hardware create an overly authoritarian appearance? An enthusiastic approach could be viewed as too aggressive or too willing to prosecute. Consider that many people may feel that the regulations and requirements they are obliged to meet already overly restrict their lives.

In heated or difficult situations try stepping back or withdrawing for a period then readdressing the matter, this allows affected parties space and time to consider their responses and attitudes. The ranger may reassess his/her own approach to the situation. Could it be more tactful or different? Does the person you are dealing with have other external influences affecting their behaviour? This may help maintain the appropriate perspective for all parties.

Unfortunately the reality is that sometimes the person the ranger is dealing with may never see, contemplate or understand any other point of view but their own, despite the very best of efforts. All that can be done in such a situation is to do what is required calmly, respectfully and as professionally as possible and leave it at that.

Remember one can only truly change or be responsible for your own communication skills and patterns. However a good response can at times diffuse, redirect or influence the attitude of others. *Unfortunately there are no rewards for co-operating or dealing well with easy going people. It is co-operating and relating to the difficult ones that count!*

SUPPORT

Adequate and appropriate support offered to the rangers in the course of their work is paramount as it influences their ability and effectiveness in doing their job. Its greatest effects are on:

- attitude;
- perspective;
- willingness to communicate and offer feedback;
- willingness to consider input and direction;
- provision of a sense of security;
- allowing for expression of frustration; and
- enormously effects self esteem.

Support is mostly maintained internally through the Rangers Department. It can be offered immediately in response to a difficult situation or by regular meetings allowing a forum for the discussion of relevant issues. This could include expressing feelings and talking about experiences to help develop perspective and formulate methods of response, discussing procedures, and the interpretation of different situations or understanding of legislation. Focus on the goals, values and direction of the department.

CONSTRAINTS IN LEGISLATION

In many aspects the activities of the Rangers Department is bound by the constraints of legislation, regulation and procedure. It must operate within this mandate. This will not always be welcomed by the community or create goodwill. This may conflict with the need to promote good public relations. Therefore it is imperative the Rangers Department responses and actions are perceived by the public to be fair, equitable and consistent.

Because the local government is a provider of community services it is consequently very aware and responsive to the community's attitude towards its function. The effect of this may be intensified by the attitudes and influences expressed by the councillors. These attitudes are often in turn reflected by senior management. This is most likely to occur when councillors are directly exposed to or recipients of community complaints. The very nature of their position as a community representative, dependant on ongoing community support, may make them more inclined to express an interest.

This may have internal influences on how issues are resolved or dealt with. Without due care these differences in focus can create different and conflicting agendas between councillors, senior management and the Rangers Department. Perhaps a greater understanding or appreciation of the binding legislated requirements of the relevant acts by councillors would assist in better alignment of these viewpoints.

Many elements of the acts, regulations and local laws require specific legal responses and procedures. This can limit and define the actions taken by the Rangers Department. It is important to carefully examine and interpret the relevant acts and legislation. Specific words can imply or remove an element of discretion. The term 'may' implies optional and allows for discretion. The term 'shall' indicates a procedural requirement.

Often when affected by these constraints, and having only minimal powers of discretion, the ranger can only rely on his skills in communication and ability to relate to people to facilitate and ease the situation to whatever extent possible.

PROVISION OF INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Periodical assessment of the direction, focus and impact of the operation of the Rangers Department is invaluable. In evaluating the community's requirements and needs:

- how much focus and time should be placed on monitoring, regulating and enforcing?
- how much focus and time should be placed on information, education and consulting?
- would greater education of the community about their responsibilities result in greater consideration and awareness towards others?
- would it impact positively on the care of their animals and the environment? Maybe even result in a reduction in the number of complaints, infringements and animal disposals!
- would this then improve the perception by the community towards the ranger services provided and/or the shire as a whole?

True communication is a two way process. The more information provided to the public in a non-conflict situation could result in greater understanding, consultation and mutual benefit.

The key to implementing any plan, goal or vision is in the *communication* of that plan, goal and vision.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brian has been working in Local Government Municipal Law Enforcement since 1984 and is currently the Manager of the Shire of Mundaring Ranger Service. Brian was the inaugural Ranger with the City of Fremantle. In 1986 he moved to the North West of Western Australia where he was Senior Ranger/Controller Ranger Services with the Shire of Roebourne for the ensuing 11 years. Brian is the elected Vice President of the Western Australian Municipal Law Enforcement Officers Association, MLEOA. Due to the recent resignation of the President of the Association he is currently acting President. He is also a member of the Western Australian Keep Australia Beautiful Council Enforcement Committee and the Metropolitan Dog Advisory Committee. Brian has an extensive background in Emergency Management and is a member of the Australian Institute of Emergency Services (MAIES).

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