

Stewart's Maxims: Eight "Do's" for Successfully Communicating Silviculture to Policymakers

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Abstract.—Technical specialists may experience difficulties in presenting information to non-technical policymakers and having that information used. Eight maxims are discussed that should help the silviculturist successfully provide technical information to non-technical audiences so that it will be considered in the formulation of policy.

INTRODUCTION

"Some of the biggest problems in silviculture are getting owners and society to define their management objectives and, especially, the degree of priority attached to various uses. Foresters can determine how much of what uses are feasible, but the owners determine actual policies about allocations. It is the responsibility of foresters to work out the details, which include the design and conduct of silvicultural treatments. Management is hamstrung if owners, particularly legislative bodies, fail to provide for the making of hard choices about allocations of forest uses and leave them to be fought over by single-minded user groups. Even worse problems can be caused by amateur prescriptions of silvicultural practices through simplistic rules ordained by legislatures, courts, or accountants." (Smith, et.al. 1997.)

This quote from the latest edition of "Practice of Silviculture" captures a critical issue in today's controversy over forest management. However, it provides no solution to this dilemma. How can the silviculturist bring technical and biological information to the table when public - or private-land management policies are being discussed? Those who have been involved in providing such information to the policymaker often have tales of frustration. They have given their best only to walk away feeling that the information they contributed was ultimately ignored while a "political" decision was made.

The fundamental problem can often be traced to one or more of the following: miscommunication resulting from use of technical jargon or a clash in values; misunderstood or conflicting agendas and needs; or misunderstood roles. This can, and does, result in non-use or misuse of technical information and, ultimately, biologically unsound policy decisions. The ultimate goals for the silviculturist are to assure that the biological options and constraints of a policy decision are both understood and considered by the policymaker when establishing natural resource policy.

I am a silviculturist by training. My early career was in the forests of the Pacific Northwest in Oregon and Washington. I worked in practical forestry as a field forester for the State of Washington, and later as a scientist with the USDA Forest

Service Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station. Later, I became a policymaker as Station Director for the Pacific Southwest Forest and Range Experiment Station, as Regional Forester for the Pacific Southwest Region, and now as Acting Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation. I have experienced the frustration of miscommunication and misunderstanding of technical information from both sides. Therefore, I am both comfortable and, I believe, qualified to speak on the topic of effectively communicating silviculture to policymakers.

STEWART'S MAXIMS

I approach this topic through the use of eight "Stewart's Maxims" or "Eight 'do's' for successfully communicating silviculture to policymakers." These maxims are based on successes and failures from my own experience. They are: (1) Know your audience; (2) Understand the policymaker's needs; (3) Know your role; (4) Focus on your message; (5) Avoid jargon and value-laden terminology; (6) Be professional; (7) Ask questions to assure that you are understood; and (8) Create options. I will briefly discuss each of these.

1-Know Your Audience

As with any presentation to any individual or group, you should begin by knowing your audience. There are some key questions that you should answer before you prepare your presentation. Who will be making the decision? In a room full of people, only one may have the authority to make the actual decision. Or, it may be made collectively by the group through consensus. In any case, it's important to know something about the decisionmakers. What is their background? What do they know about the subject? What related decisions have they made in the past? How do they like to receive information?

Some policymakers have a technical background in your subject area. If so, they may understand, and even appreciate, the technical details. Others have absolutely no knowledge or interest in the details. Some policymakers are visually oriented while others are more auditory. Some like details, while others just like to get to the bottomline.

It's up to you to find out the policymaker's background, including their style in getting and using information. Then, you should use this knowledge responsibly to make your presentation most helpful.

2-Understand the Policymaker's Needs

It's important to go beyond a simple understanding of the policymaker's background and how they have dealt with similar issues in the past. To improve your effectiveness and usefulness to the policymaker, I suggest that you try to understand their needs. For example, what pressures and

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constraints are they under? Who are the key outside players influencing the decision? An example here may be helpful.

A number of years ago, I was scheduled to testify at a field hearing on a very controversial subject. In preparation for the hearing, the national forest had arranged a field tour for the two local members of Congress. As we traveled around the forest together, it became apparent that, while the two Congressmen were sympathetic to the needs of the Forest Service, their constituency, several local environmental groups, were pushing them toward a restrictive legislative fix. They were obviously uncomfortable with this, but had no ready alternative. Now, I'm one of those who believes that legislative fixes for basically biological issues do not often make either good biology or good policy. However, if we didn't find a solution for them, they would be forced into finding one for us. The two Congressmen needed a solution that would get them "off-the-hook."

During the evening after the field trip, we met with the Forest Supervisor and the key forest staff. We brainstormed some solutions that we could live with, and following several phone calls to get acceptance by other Forest Service and Administration players, we developed a workable alternative. Some final work the next morning allowed us to make a preemptive policy statement at the hearing later that day. The statement caught the environmental community off-guard, resulted in very favorable press coverage for the Forest Service, and produced a grateful sigh of relief from the two Congressmen. The result was a workable policy, improved credibility for the agency, and two appreciative members of Congress.

3-Know Your Role

"Through science, we can describe options for addressing management problems and provide assessments of their consequences. But science simply will not and can not give society 'the answer.' Science is only a tool—in the end, all managerial decisions are moral, not technical" (Thomas 1994).

You are not the decisionmaker; your role is to present the factual information and, when fully disclosed as such, your professional opinion. Your goal is, to the best of your ability, to assure that the needs of the forest are appropriately considered and to help find creative, biologically-sound solutions. I'm reminded here of statements made by the first Chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot. These are from his list of eleven maxims for guiding the behavior of foresters in public office taught to his students at the Yale School of Forestry from 1910 to 1920. The first maxim says, "A public official is there to serve the public and not to run them." The seventh maxim says, "Don't try any sly or foxy politics, because a forester is not a politician."

In some respects, the silviculturist should approach the task of informing the policymaker as a teacher and coach. In the past, I felt that it was my job to convince and cajole the policymaker into making the "right" decision. I often walked away frustrated that the person had made another one of

those "political" decisions and ignored the biological facts. I have since learned that the best biological solutions that aren't politically implementable are not solutions at all.

4-Focus On Your Message

The **KISS** principle (**Keep It Simple Stupid**) is generally the best approach to get your point across. Remember my first and second maxims: Know your audience and their needs. What specific points do you want to make? What is the most effective and easy way to make them? Think through your message carefully. Don't overload the listener with interesting but unnecessary information. Know what you want to say, what the key messages are, and then stick to them. It is best to aim for only a few key points, carefully and thoughtfully made, but reinforced often. Rarely will anyone remember more than three or five key points, so don't waste your brilliant thoughts all at one time. Save some for later.

Most policymakers are very busy with many, often complex issues. They may have only limited time to become engaged in your issue. While it may be of intense interest to you, it may be only one on a long list of politically hot topics needing the policymaker's time. This presents a challenge to, first get his or her attention, and then to efficiently and effectively present your information. It's a good practice to try to say what you have to say in ten minutes or less and to use a handout summary of your information on two pages or less.

Finally, those of us from technical or scientific backgrounds tend to throw better and better technical or science-based solutions at what are fundamentally social- or value- based problems. We then wonder why our solutions don't work or are rejected.

Because many people are visually-oriented, a simple picture, graph, or diagram can quite literally be worth a thousand words. Unfortunately, finding ways to simply illustrate complex ideas is difficult and requires a real talent. It may be worth the effort to test your presentation out on someone who is not well acquainted with your subject before you deliver it before the policymaker. This should provide some indication of the clarity of your information. You should also test any visual aids at the same time. This extra step may be well worth the effort.

5-Avoid Jargon and Value-Laden Terminology

Speak and write simply and plainly. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms or complex, esoteric biological arguments. Failure to do so confuses the non-technical policymaker, assures that your points will be ignored, and makes you appear to be intellectually arrogant. Again, I refer you to my first maxim, know your audience. If you don't communicate in language your audience understands, **you really don't communicate**. A bit of Gifford Pinchot's wisdom is appropriate here. His sixth maxim says: "Get rid of the attitude of personal arrogance or pride of attainment or superior knowledge." A good attitude is humility, remember you don't know everything.

Remember the quote from former Forest Service Chief Thomas that all managerial decisions are, in the final analysis, moral not technical (Thomas 1994). It is important that we try to keep our own values and biases out of our efforts when describing options for addressing problems or providing assessments of their consequences.

Because the practice of forestry arises out of a basic utilitarian view of the forest, its language often assumes a particular value system. We must be careful, if we are to be heard, to avoid such value-laden terminology.

I remember being on a field trip with a Forest Service District Silviculturist and several people from the local environmental community, including the president of the California Native Plant Society. As we walked through a magnificent old-growth forest, the silviculturist described the stand as old, decadent, and on the decline. In other words, from a forester's viewpoint, ready for harvest and conversion to a thrifty young forest. While she described this stand she was unwittingly conveying a value system. That this was so was verified as I watched the body language on the president of the California Native Plant Society. With an angry red face, he declared that it was not "a decadent old forest" but a "beautiful ancient and primeval forest. This was an obvious, and clearly avoidable, conflict in values. From this point on, the two ignored each other and no further useful communication occurred for the remainder of the field trip.

6-Be Professional

When you make your presentation, dress and act professionally. Do not compromise your professionalism regardless of the importance of the decision. If you expect to be asked for your advice again, you must have a reputation for consistent, unbiased, professional information and opinion. This means full disclosure, even of the information that does not support your personal position.

Here again, I fall back on the good advice from Gifford Pinchot's eleven maxims. The eighth maxim says, "Learn tact simply by being absolutely honest and sincere, and by learning to recognize the point of view of the other man and meet him with arguments he will understand." The ninth maxim says, "Don't be afraid to give credit to someone else when it belongs to you; not to do so is the sure mark of a weak man. But to do so is the hardest lesson to learn. Encourage others to do things; you may accomplish many things through others that you can't get done on your single initiative." Maxim ten says, "Don't be a knocker; use persuasion rather than force, when possible. Plenty of knockers are to be found; your job is to promote unity." And finally, maxim eleven says, "Don't make enemies unnecessarily and for trivial reasons. If you are any good, you will make plenty of them on matters of straight honesty and public policy, and you need all the support you can get."

Be honest and sincere. Share the credit. Build up, don't tear down. Don't go looking for trouble. It is not difficult to understand that following these four rules will increase your credibility and your usefulness to policymakers.

Again, a humble attitude is essential. We do not have all the answers. Advice from a 1930 editorial in the *Journal of Forestry* is still useful today:

"The world is, and doubtless always will be, in a state of change. Old requirements must be modified, new ones met, conflicting ones harmonized. What is right today may be wrong tomorrow. Keeping a policy up to date is therefore fully as important as formulating it in the first instance.

Conceivably some Moses among us might be able to outline a forest policy perfectly suited to present conditions. That it would be unanimously approved even within our own Society [Society of American Foresters] is, however, unlikely; and that it would be adopted by the country at large is inconceivable. Things do not simply happen that way in a democracy where every man is entitled to his views and his vote.

That foresters less frequently see eye to eye today when they are engaged in a hundred diverse activities than twenty years ago when they were practically all in government employ, is as natural, and perhaps as desirable, as it is inevitable. On the whole this is cause for congratulation, since the truth is mostly likely to emerge from differences of opinion fully, frankly, and good-naturedly discussed. It means, however, that ample patience, tolerance, and tact must be used in reaching decisions in which a majority of the profession can concur, and that agreement on most points may be impossible when the facts are not fully known or when they point in more than one direction (Society of American Foresters 1930)."

7-Ask Questions

Don't be afraid to ask questions during your presentation to determine if you are being understood. Its counterproductive to go completely through your presentation only to find that your audience didn't "get it." The policymaker may be embarrassed to admit he or she doesn't know what you are talking about, so its up to you to make it easy for them to admit ignorance. Watch body language—like a blank look—for signs that your audience has either tuned out or is lost in one of your elegant technical points.

8-Create Options

Our problem as professional foresters is that we may be unwilling to propose or accept any solution that does not appear to be perfect from a biological or professional viewpoint. But, as I have suggested, we suffer from less than perfect and complete knowledge, we may be bound by our own biases, and even the best biological solution that can't be implemented in the prevailing political climate is no solution at all.

I'm not suggesting that we should compromise our professional integrity. Ultimately, our personal integrity and truthfulness is all we have. What I am saying is that we need to understand our own limitations. There almost always are

more than one workable solution to a problem. Be prepared to create options for the policymaker. A good question to ask is, "What would a successful outcome look like?" Allowing the policymaker to answer this question will help clarify the probable decision space that the policymaker feels that he or she is working within. Your job then, is to increase either the decision space or provide new options within the existing decision space, all within the biological limits of the ecosystem. As you do this, make the full range of options and their consequences clear in a professional manner. And, remember my third maxim: Know your role! You are not the decisionmaker. Once you have given your best effort, leave the decision where it belongs.

I believe that if you practice these eight maxims, you will be in demand and at the table when critical policies involving the nation's natural resources are being made. The next time you

are preparing for a presentation before someone who will be using your information to make a decision, try them out.

LITERATURE CITED

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