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Emerging issue management

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Introduction

Large livestock producers face a range of public policy and public perception issues that can have a negative impact on the business. Pressure from activists, media coverage, and company behavior influence policy makers, customers, consumers, employees, and community leaders.

Effective issue management is a challenge for any organization. There are additional challenges unique to the livestock industry. Those include the following:

- A general lack of experience in issue management.
- A reluctance to engage in a process that the industry cannot control.
- A reluctance to engage in a process with a less-than-certain outcome.
- Difficulty measuring return-on-investment.
- A reluctance to adopt change that is not “science based.”
- A general reluctance to influence by external audiences.
- Limited leadership resources and a margin structure that inhibits additional resource development.
- Competition for resources (both human and financial) that favors those efforts with an immediate, measurable return.

Historically animal agriculture has resisted progressive issue management. Societal acceptance of animal agriculture, particularly large scale animal agriculture, changed more rapidly than the industry’s ability or willingness to manage these issues. The juggernaut mentality of the swine industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s came into direct conflict with societal expectations. When there were several high profile manure spills in the US Midwest and the complete failure of a lagoon wall at the Oceanview farm in North Carolina, the issues took on a full public identity; the term “Factory Farm” became part of our collective vocabulary, and public policy makers felt the need to respond.

Visceral vs. strategic responses

The industry responded in very traditional ways after we landed on the front page, and legislators were calling for stricter environmental control. **Figure 1** details the lifecycle of an issue. Let’s apply the cycle to environmental concerns regarding large scale animal agriculture.

In the mid 1980s some environmental and academic groups began to express concern about the changing structure of the swine industry and the environmental impact of large scale animal agriculture. These concerns were expressed as societal expectations in trade journals and academic circles but had not yet reached the mainstream press or the radar screen of most policy makers. Those concerns were largely dismissed by the industry as coming from the “radical fringe” and “not science based” and, therefore, not worthy of management attention.

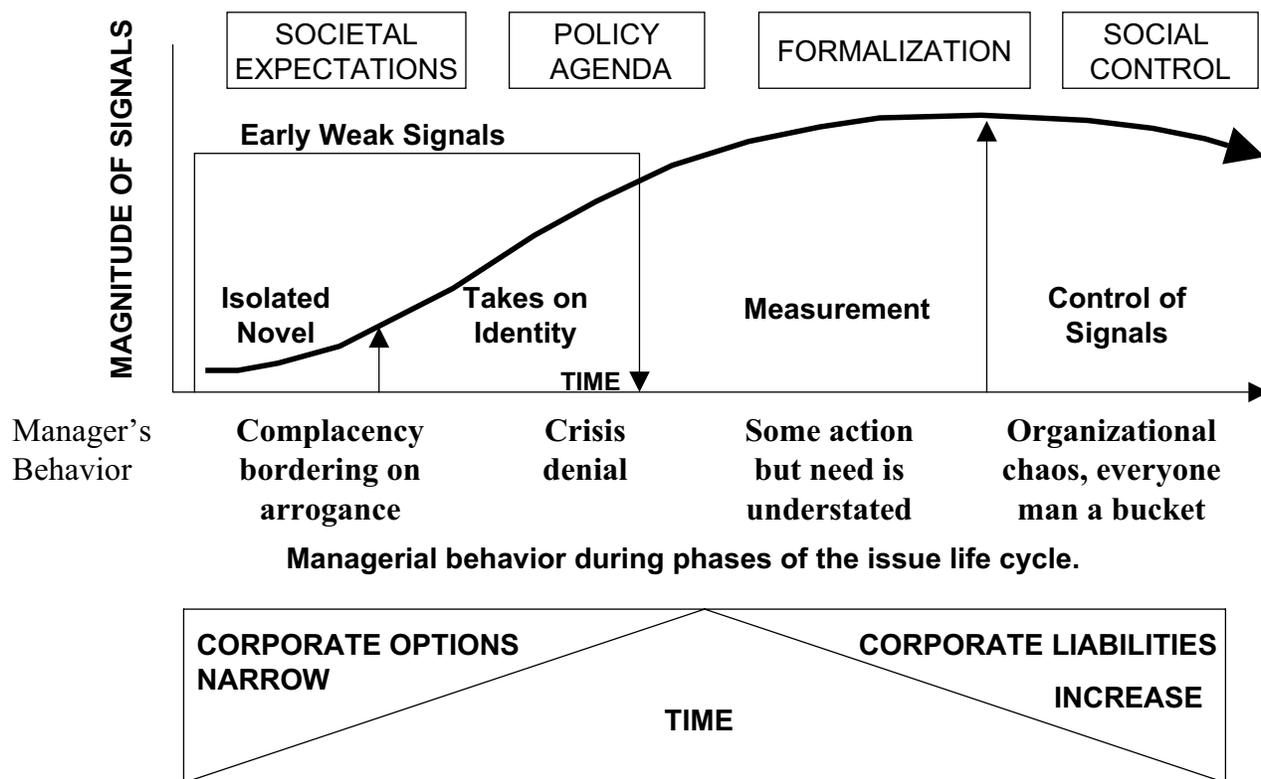
By 1990 the growth of large scale animal agriculture in several states generated enough attention that a few large newspapers in key swine producing states had picked up the story, and some farm state legislators were beginning to ask questions that had been raised by constituents. In those states where legislation was being proposed as a policy agenda, the industry response was limited to modifying or opposing the new restrictions.

In 1995 the environmental issues were formalized following the manure spills in the Midwest and the Oceanview collapse. Policy makers, fueled by constituent concerns and media coverage of these environmental incidents, were quick to respond with blue ribbon commissions, legislation, and tighter regulations. Industry response was limited to lobbying the final regulations and questioning enforcement.

Social control is evidenced by enforcement from the responsible agencies and compliance on the part of large scale animal agriculture. Public attention has declined and leveled at a new plateau, and media coverage is incident-driven rather than chronic in most cases. The industry is now faced with rigorous on-going regulation of our environmental practices.

There is much to be learned from our environmental experience. Not only have we developed better environmental systems and management, but we are also working to

Figure 1: The lifecycle of an issue.



Issue evolves from environmental degradation to environmental protection.

improve our issue management process. These lessons should be applied as we face new challenges in animal welfare, food safety, antibiotic use, and other yet-to-be-named issues.

Too frequently animal agriculture has responded viscerally instead of strategically. Feeling attacked and on the defensive, we quickly fall back into a functional foxhole, focusing solely on those things over which we have direct control, or we attack our attackers, launching tirades that increase media interest and damage our credibility.

Veteran social activist Sol Alinsky may have said it best in his 1960s manual, *Rules for Radicals*. Alinsky said the real action is the enemy's reaction, and "that properly goaded and guided, his reaction will be your major strength."

Ashley and Morrison in their book, *Anticipatory Management*, also make the case for a strategic, rather than visceral, response. "When businesses do not engage in anticipatory planning, their ability to help define an issue, set the agenda and establish the limits of the issue is limited. An issue ignored is a crisis invited."

Avoiding the boiled frog phenomenon

When placed in a beaker of cold water that is gradually heated, a frog will be quite comfortable for some time, ignoring the impending danger of increasing temperature. By the time the water becomes hot enough to boil and kill the frog, however, the animal is too weak to take any action to escape its fate.

Animal agriculture finds itself in a beaker of issues today, each with an unknown capacity to turn up the heat. The question is, will we recognize the impending danger and take effective action before we are boiled?

Effective issue management will be anticipatory in nature, and focus on emerging issues before they become formalized and reach crisis. To be effective, the process must work to align stakeholder expectation and industry performance. If we are generally viewed as having values or behaviors that are contrary to societal expectations, we can fully anticipate additional public policy intervention in our production and/or processing practices.

There are three ways to close the gap between stakeholder expectations and company or industry performance:

- Change stakeholder expectations

- Change company performance
- Change a combination of both

Effective issue management requires a willingness to change company or industry practices when necessary. Issue management is not a public relations “scheme.” It is the application of a mutual gains strategy to resolve conflict before a crisis.

There are many effective issue management models. Several have been published and many leading public relations and public affairs firms use proprietary models with their clients. All of the effective models share several common elements:

- An ability to anticipate issues or identify emerging issues quickly
- An ability to quantify the potential impact on the organization
- A willingness to engage stakeholders outside the organization
- A willingness to examine and potentially change company or industry practices
- A willingness to be accountable for implementing action plans
- An ability to communicate with stakeholders

Each of these elements is critical in identifying and closing gaps between stakeholder expectations and company or industry performance.

Selecting an issue management model

Because of the unique issue management challenges facing the livestock industry, selecting the most appropriate issue management model is critical. Many of the models used effectively by other organizations would not be well suited to the livestock industry. Because of our limited experience and resources, the issue management model should be simple and straight forward.

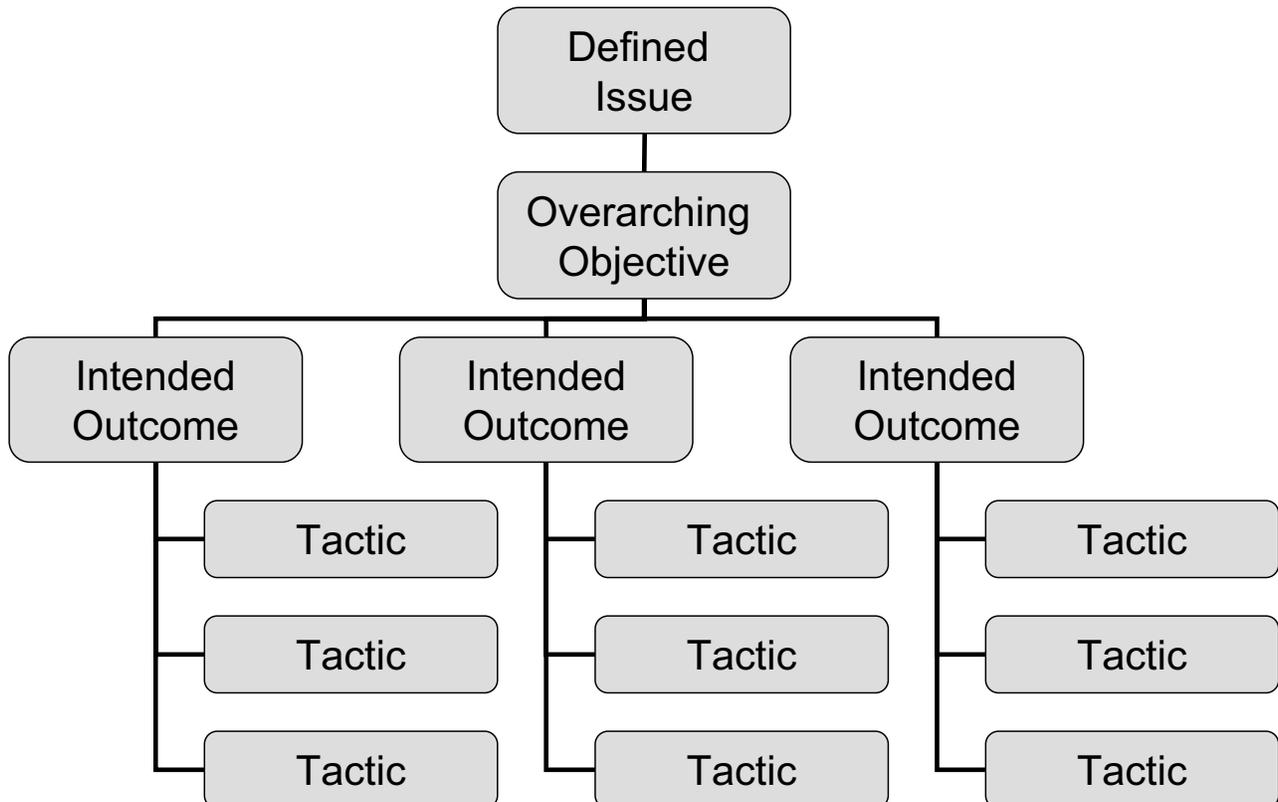
The Do-It Plan developed by Tony Jaques meets the criteria for an effective issue management model for the livestock industry (see **Figure 2**). Do-It is an acronym that highlights two keys to effective issue management:

- A reminder that issue management is not a spectator sport—it’s about taking action.
- A reminder of the four steps in the process—Definition, Objective, Intended Outcomes, and Tactics.

A series of key questions can help guide users through each of the four steps in the Do-It issue management process:

Step one: Definition

Figure 2: Elements of the Do-It plan developed by Tony Jaques



What really is the issue? How could it impact the organization? What is the worst case scenario? Do all the key players agree on what the issue is?

Step two: Objective

What is the single, over-arching objective? Is it strategic to our business goals? Is it attainable/realistic? Will achieving the objective impact the issue?

Step three: Intended outcomes

What must happen to deliver the objective? What do we plan to make happen? Will achieving these intended outcomes help us reach our objective?

Step four: Tactics

What actions must be completed to achieve each intended outcome? Is the organization willing and able to commit to the tactics? Who will execute each tactic and when? Will completing these tactics deliver each intended outcome?

While successful implementation of any issue management strategy requires more than a simple diagram and a set of questions, these provide a framework for starting the process. Implementing the Do-It Plan or other effective issue management strategies can help reduce the risk of additional litigation and regulation which will not only enhance our image, but also improve the bottom line.

Being the catalyst for change is never easy and rarely appreciated. However, effective issue management offers the opportunity to improve the industry's performance financially, operationally, and ethically. It's an opportunity we should embrace.

