

A strategy for nuclear communications – listen

Not a day goes by when we don't read something about the public acceptance problem in the nuclear industry. A [recent article](#) preaching the end of the nuclear era had a pretty strong statement that sums up like this – *"Nuclear looks ever more like a 20th-century dinosaur, unloved by investors, the public, and policymakers alike."* While I don't believe this is actually the case, I am sure that many in the public would not find much to fault with it. And that is the challenge we face.

For more than 30 years we have been hearing that the public just don't understand the nuclear message – that we need to better educate them – and that while we are all smart folks we are very bad at communicating. Yawn.....

As an industry, we pride ourselves on maintaining detailed OPEX from around the world and learning lessons to foster continuous operations improvement. Yet, while there has actually been a lot of recent good work on communicating with the public, in this non-technical area we are much slower in leaning the lessons we need to learn.

Beliefs about nuclear power are well entrenched in society. Most of the concerns come from its weapons origin and a significant fear of radiation that will not just go away with a simple explanation or better education.

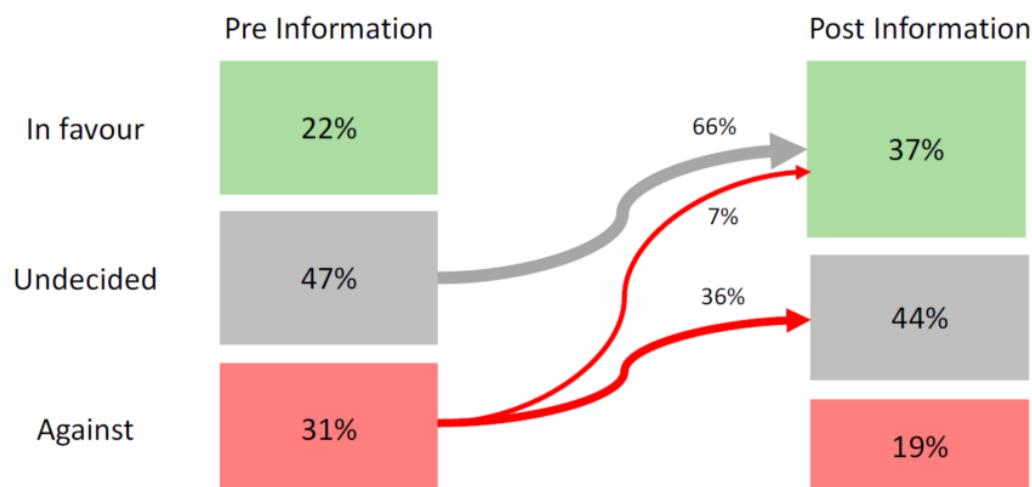
This fear translates into fears about nuclear power plants. It is a common belief that we are safely operating doomsday machines. i.e. that a nuclear accident can have such far reaching consequences that it can literally destroy the world. If that is one's belief how can you convince him or her to support this technology? Talking about low probabilities is of little interest when the perceived consequence is so dire.

Yet, there is hope. There is generational change coming and this new generation is not afraid of technology, but rather sees it as the solution to everything. They have other issues on their minds such as climate change – they likely don't think much about nuclear power at all.

In our home country of Canada, a recent small study shows very interesting results. Without any scene setting, a simple question on whether the public is in favour of nuclear power shows about a fifth in favour, a third against and the most, about half in the undecided column. This probably demonstrates that nuclear power is not a top of mind issue for many Canadians. However, what is important about this study is that once the question is asked again, if prefaced by some scenarios providing information – such as today nuclear provides 17% of electricity in Canada but less than 1% of carbon emissions; or that

Canada has more than 50 years of operating nuclear plants safely; or that small reactors may provide much needed energy to help in Canada's remote communities; then the result is quite different. The chart below suggests that given a positive reason to think about nuclear power, people are likely to change their view with support growing and opposition declining. The lesson here is that people can be open to a new discussion about nuclear power BUT this must be on the basis of them considering that it is a possible solution to an issue of relative importance to them.

CAN IDEAS SHIFT OPINION?



Or to be more clear, the first step is not trying to reduce the fear of nuclear. Without giving people a reason to listen you may as well be talking to yourself. What is needed is to LISTEN, understand what issues are important to the public and demonstrate that nuclear power is a possible solution. Whether their issue is climate change, energy poverty in the far north, energy innovation, high quality job creation, or just electricity reliability; it is only by addressing these issues that there will be an appetite for listening to us to find out more.

A great example is the group [Environmental Progress](#) in the USA. Here is a world renown life long environmentalist, Michael Shellenberger, taking up the fight to support nuclear power as a tool to meet environmental goals. I don't know Michael personally but I would guess that he didn't just wake up one day with a huge aha moment and decide nuclear power is a fantastic technology that he wanted to support; but rather he looked for solutions to what is important to him, the environment. This is clearly set out in the EP mission – “*Nature and Prosperity for All – Environmental Progress (EP) was founded to achieve two big goals: lift all humans out of poverty, and save the natural environment. These goals can be achieved by mid-century – but only if we remove the obstacles to cheap, reliable and clean energy.*” I expect that over time, in his quest to improve the environment, he came to consider nuclear as an

option and became open to listening and learning more about whether this option would help to achieve these goals.

I have read many of the posts by EP and they are excellent. But what is of interest to me as an industry person is that the arguments being made in support of nuclear power are not new. In fact, they are mostly the same arguments we have been making for the more than the 35 years we have been in this industry. So, what has changed? The dialogue. Once there was a clear goal that is not directly about nuclear power, there became an openness to learn more about those options that can help meet that goal. And then the facts can be discussed and as we know, the facts tell a good story.

What do we learn here? We have a huge opportunity today to change the discussion about nuclear power, but the first step is to stop and listen. It's not about talking about safety and the LNT model for radiation protection; it's about understanding the issues of importance to a new generation and then having a conversation to show that nuclear can be part of the solution. Just trying to educate has taken us nowhere. But once we listen, then we can expect others to open their minds and listen too. Only then can we say that nuclear power is not a 20th – century dinosaur; but rather is a technological wonder able to produce the huge amounts of clean reliable energy required for the 21st century and beyond.

Note: This is one of a series of posts to engage in a healthy discussion on public acceptance and nuclear advocacy. As we think about these issues we would like to point out an excellent book by Meredith Angwin, "[Campaigning for Clean Air: Strategies for Pro-Nuclear Advocacy](#)". If you are at all interested in nuclear advocacy, this is a must read.