

Happyvale *By Neil Cranston*

Happyvale is a medium size regional town with a population of some 20 000 people. The town is relatively diverse in its socio-economic make-up. There are two state high schools, a small catholic college, a small TAFE college and five primary schools of various sizes (three state, two catholic).

The town was established about 20 years ago, as a joint project between the state government and a major chemical company that has invested a great deal of money in the area. It was encouraged to locate here by attractive tax incentives from the government. Many families work for the chemical company in some capacity or other, or in small businesses providing support to the town people. Some Happyvale people also hold small farm leases from the chemical company, supplementing their income by growing food and running small herds of cattle. Consequently, the company has considerable influence in the community, not only with the workers it employs, but also with local businesses as well as the Happyvale town council.

You are part of a small local community group that acts on issues affecting people in Happyvale, particularly as they relate to the environment. Your community group has recently developed relationships with a number of volunteer bodies in the town.

For the last month or so on your early morning run, you have seen trucks from the chemical company dumping liquid waste in the local creek which backs on to a parkland, a popular play and recreational area for children and families. You suspect the waste might be toxic as birdlife in the area has declined recently and you have noticed dead fish on the creek-bed. Your neighbour, a school teacher, told you many students who had visited the parkland-creek area recently were reporting that they were ill.

You decide that something must be done to investigate the situation. Should your concerns about the actions of the chemical company be verified, you are committed to mounting a campaign to address these.

Questions

1. Make a list of the key stakeholders and interested parties that you think you might have to involve in your actions.
2. You raise your concerns with your community group. What key points might you raise with them? How would you do this?
3. Identify a few different strategies that the community group might consider in taking action(s).
4. For each of these strategies, identify (a) advantages/disadvantages (b) the impact of the strategies on the key stakeholders/interested parties identified in 1. above (c) the roles you individually, and your group, might play in these and (d) specific challenges each strategy might face.
5. From a consideration of your responses to 4., select the strategy you think would be most successful and effective. What was your rationale for this choice?
6. What particular skills might (a) you and (b) members of your community group need to develop before embarking on this strategy? Where/how might you access/develop these skills?



Answers

Some possible “answers” ... Note these are suggestions only and other possibilities might be just as appropriate. You should also note that the “answers” should not be seen to imply that actions and solutions to address such matters as those arising at Happyvale are simple and straightforward. On the contrary, they are likely to be highly complex and challenging for anyone in a leadership position.

Q 1:

- Members of the management team of chemical company
- Leaders, members of other volunteer bodies in the town
- Principals, parent representatives of the local schools
- Health officials – hospital, doctors etc
- Local council member (s)
- Any local environmental scientists – from local TAFE, school etc
- Local union representatives, especially those representing groups at the company (it is worth noting here that they might need reminding that their own children are likely to be affected by the company’s actions)

Q 2:

- Need to obtain some objective data on the possible health issues/implications before any meeting with the company – this can then be tabled as evidence of negative consequences of their actions on the community. For example, local analytical chemists might be used to gather relevant evidence of contaminants in the water
- Need to canvas the impact (eg. numbers of children affected) of the company’s actions – such data can then be tabled in discussions with the company
- Discuss and identify some agreed upon effective strategies for action eg. meetings with other stakeholder groups; evidence gathering; media strategy; planning in the longer term

Q 3:

- Seek a meeting to discuss the concerns directly with the management of the company – using evidence such as that identified in Q 2 above
- Establish a wider representative group (including other key stakeholders – refer Q 1) to seek a meeting with the management of the company – this would demonstrate wider community support for the concerns and minimise criticism that it was simply a “problem” being raised by a small group of “troublemakers”
- Seek publicity for your concerns through local media outlets as well as support of local political/council members – particularly if the response from the chemical company is negative in the first instance

Q 4 & 5:

- General advantages to be considered in any/all of the various strategies that might be employed include:
 - Avoid setting up potential negative responses by the company due to what might be perceived as threatening action – at least early in the campaign – that is, seek to address the concerns in a collaborative/partnership way
 - Seek strategies that are objective, factual and balanced – while it might be difficult to minimise emotional reactions, especially where children’s health is concerned, the company is much more likely to respond to factual data of the negative impact on their actions
- General disadvantages of strategies to consider:
 - Potential for some strategies to become emotionally charged – this will be difficult in challenges such as this one (see comment above)

Q 6:

There will be demands on skills such as:

- Individual and group leadership skills
- Capacity to negotiate, collaborate and consult
- Capacity to present complex information in various forms understandable and effective in raising major issues to different and varied groups and individuals e.g. writing press releases; presenting scientific information for lay audiences

Leaders in the community will need to be good networkers and have an understanding of others' abilities to harness the available skills across the Happyvale community. Existing skills will be important as there may be little time to develop new skills in this particular case.

