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Who Said CAVE People Are Extinct?



By Dorothy Burton



Practically every city and town in America has them. There are clusters of them from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River and from sea to shining sea. They are the CAVE people—Citizens Against Virtually Everything.

No matter how lean the budget, it is always overly inflated. No matter the bond issue, it is grossly inadequate; either too big or not big enough. Progress is viewed as an intrusion. And no matter how open the discussion, council decisions are pre-determined in back room, secretive meetings.

Sounds familiar? And while CAVE people may not prevail on many issues, they are extremely vocal, highly resilient and very persistent. And elected leaders commit a grave error by ignoring them or brushing them off as oddballs or idiots. The tragedy oftentimes for elected leaders is that they fail to fully understand the rules of engagement when dealing with CAVE people. By not knowing the rules of engagement, and pushing full steam ahead with their agenda, councils unknowingly hand over the reigns of leadership to CAVE people. And if you're not careful, the CAVE people, rather than the elected leaders, end up driving the coach while the council is taken for a very uncomfortable and embarrassing ride.

How Do They Do That?

Quite simple. While CAVE people obviously do not have a vote on the council, they can hurl enough verbal assaults to easily influence the outcome of elections; raise enough suspicion to sway public opinion on important issues; and bring the unwanted and unwarranted glare of the media. Let's face it, CAVE people can be every council's nightmare and a constant irritation. But, do they have to be? The answer quite simply is no. They can be neutralized and their influence minimized. It is just a matter of learning and consistently applying the rules of engagement:

Pay Attention

If a citizen or group of citizens attends council, board and committee meetings on a regular basis, they may just be interested citizens. On the other hand if they consistently attend, find fault with or make verbal attacks on nearly every action taken, then Houston, you've got a problem. CAVE people may not hit a home run the first few times at bat. But the law of average will eventually prevail. And oftentimes sooner, rather than later, CAVE people will exploit a seemingly obscure item, which will ignite the fire underneath the masses. If so, you're already behind the 8 Ball. So, pay close attention to who attends your meetings.

The Devil You Know Is Better Than the One You Don't

Always make a point to visit with or at least acknowledge members of the group before the official start of the meeting. If there are those you do not know, shake hands and introduce yourself. They will of course already know who you are, but nothing beats a personal introduction. If you do know some of the group members, acknowledge them and thank them for taking the time to attend meetings. Then immediately ask a more personal, general question. If you know their spouse, ask them by name how they are doing, ask about the kids. If there are common interests such as golf, briefly mention your last handicap. If you are fellow church members, mention the sermon last Sunday.

All of this can be quite disarming and can go a long way in making you appear more warm, more friendly, but most important, more human. While it likely will not dissuade them from saying what they came to the meeting to say, it could go a long way in diminishing what would have been more edgy comments. It is always easier to fight with a foe than a friend.

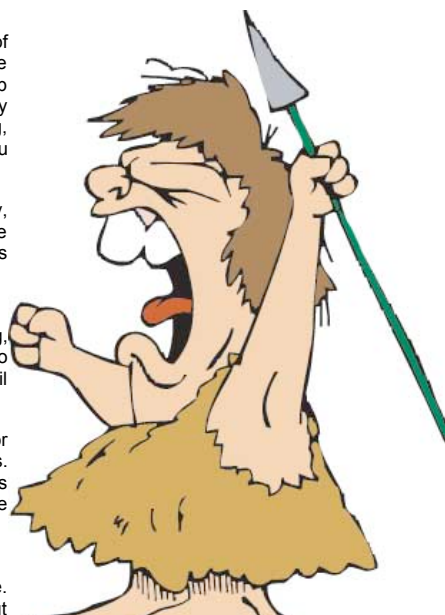
Know Before You Go

Study the dynamics of the group, because they could change from council meeting to council meeting, and so too could the leaders. And never underestimate their strength or resolve. CAVE people play to win, period. They want to win public sympathy; they want to win by publicly tearing down individual council members; or, win majority council support for their position.

The group could be one tightly wound around a single issue, or a loosely knit group consisting of two or more coalitions; the latter of which may have formed to fight a single issue, but for varied reasons. Regardless of the issue or issues, one fundamental principle that CAVE people know well is that there is strength in numbers and numbers can be intimidating—especially to elected officials. And they will take the numbers from wherever they can find them to combat the common enemy—you.

Never assume anything

Never assume you know who the CAVE people's leader is, because there could easily be more than one. He or she may or may not be the most vocal of the group, but certainly is the most influential. Find out



whom that person(s) is and if possible, the mayor and city manager should schedule to meet informally with him or her.



Promise nothing more than a listening ear and open mind. And actively listen to their concerns. If action can be taken to address their concerns, place the item on the next available agenda and take formal action to resolve it. If the issue takes further study, inform them and have staff get to work on it. And always provide feedback as to progress being made. If their issue cannot be resolved for legitimate reasons, tell them; never lead them to believe otherwise.

And if it cannot be resolved, still place the item on the agenda for discussion (particularly if it has become a hotbed issue) so that the broader community will know that you have actively listened to the group's concerns. This gives the council an opportunity to publicly state the reasons why there can be no resolution. This will go a long way in neutralizing rumors. The council may still have problems with the CAVE people, and their lingering outbursts on the issue. But the CAVE people will lose their effectiveness over time because by taking action, the council stands an excellent chance of winning back any lost public sentiment.

Citizens respect leaders who initiate positive action. Even if the action taken cannot resolve the issue, the public for the most part respects leaders who go the extra mile by trying. They will quickly turn a deaf ear to the CAVE people who continue to complain without just cause. Citizens can, at times, be fickle and unforgiving; but can also prove to be your greatest ally. They will root for the underdog, but once the issues of the underdog have been addressed, public empathy and sympathy can quickly turn to resentment and the CAVE people in this instance can come off looking like selfish whiners. And in the court of public opinion, the council wins.

Be Certain of the Real Issue and Include Them

CAVE people are not at all shy about voicing their disgust, mistrust and anger at the council regarding a particular issue. But, that particular issue may not at all be the real reason for their anger. It could be merely a symptom. Oftentimes, there are longstanding, unaddressed issues seething just beneath the surface, which the current issue at hand causes to erupt. And those issues may or may not be connected. In fact, they often are mutually exclusive. But CAVE people have very long memories. And if their concerns have not been satisfactorily addressed in the past; or if promises were made that were never kept, then any issue which arises that is in any way perceived as threatening will conjure up vivid reminders of past disappointments. And the anger and disappointment over the unaddressed issue(s) are automatically transferred to the issue at hand. And the mistake councils so often make is that they spend energies battling with CAVE people over the issue at hand, when in fact they are unwittingly shadow boxing with ghost issues from the past — ghost issues kept alive in the hearts and minds of the CAVE people. And they are resurrected each time it appears the council is discussing and deciding an issue that would, in their minds, cause them to again receive the short end of the stick. Your council's credibility then becomes irrationally tied to the credibility of past councils. And unless council members understand this, they will continue to focus on issue X, when the real fight is about issue Y.

The question becomes then, how do you fix a perceived problem that you had no hand in causing? And the answer is that you can't. However, you should publicly acknowledge that mistakes could have been made in the past. But never criticize decisions of past councils. If you were a member of the council at the time, explain from a historical perspective why the decision was made. Never single out any past council member nor speculate on why they voted the way they did. Show genuine empathy for their position.

Reaffirm your commitment to always act honestly and with integrity. Explain that now that you know what their real concerns are, you pledge to not make the same mistakes; and, that you are willing to work with them to make the best decisions possible, based upon the best information available. No one could ask for more. Though difficult, always remain calm and take a reasoned, rational approach. Emotions will run high on both sides. But as the elected leader, you must always set the tone by never letting personal feelings or emotions get in the way.

As long as there are city councils, there will always be CAVE people. And rather than ignoring them and hoping they go away, include them in the decision-making process when possible. Ask them to lead or participate on a citizen's task force or appoint them to a board or committee. Most have never been asked, and would love the opportunity. You may be pleasantly surprised. Over time, they could become welcomed allies.

For those CAVE people seeking real solutions, by making them part of the solution, they will likely take ownership rather than take exception and will put forth more effort in ensuring more acceptable outcomes. And those who aren't so inclined, won't. These take real pride in being CAVE people, and have absolutely no interest in the process of evolution.

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Dorothy Burton is a member of the Duncanville, Texas City Council, a writer and professional speaker. A recognized expert in city and county government, she speaks frequently around the country on customer/voter-centered governing for elected and appointed officials. She can be reached at 972-709-9018 or www.publicrole.com.

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