

## Advancing Energy Literacy in Alberta Banff - March 2010

### Judy Winter



I am here as a member of Synergy Alberta and I bring a community voice to the Board of Directors. I realize that not everyone here is familiar with the synergy movement, so I will endeavor to show you how it works and how the respect & trust that is so vital to synergy can be valuable in moving Energy Literacy forward most satisfactorily. Synergy simply means working together with the stakeholders....industry, community and the regulators.

In the late nineties, most of the landowners I knew had a very negative impression about oil & gas companies. We felt we had been bullied, disrespected, and run over. The negotiations were minimal, the communication was just adequate and the response to concerns was often nothing or rude. The companies would promise anything just to get a landowner's signature on the contract. The promises rarely were kept, the agreements were often broken and the distrust & disrespect grew in the minds of the landowners and industry folk alike. Threats and violence began to raise their ugly heads. This toxic relationship was not working well for anyone. Many oil & gas employees were our neighbours and because of the bitter feelings, we would cross the street rather than have to talk to each other. With the added pressure of coalbed methane production starting up, the cumulative impacts were getting overwhelming. I like to say we had nowhere to go but up.

Very tentatively it was suggested that what we were doing was obviously not working, so maybe, instead of always fighting each other, we should....wait for it....maybe try talking TO each other. It seemed a crazy notion to some but really we had to try something. The oil & gas industry was an integral part of our community and it was going to get even more active. So groups were formed; some with just community members, some with only industry. I'm quite sure in several of those early meetings, the company representatives invited to the table by the community groups probably were afraid they were invited to the table to BE eaten, but they came. Once we started talking TO each other instead of AT or ABOUT each other, something started to happen. Remember, we had nowhere to go but up. Soon the discussions revealed the **people** behind the company façade and the farmer's ballcap. Bit by bit, by learning about each other's needs and concerns, the respect started to grow...just a little mind you. I remember the first meeting with one company and one of the oil men said "Wow, I never thought about it that way before" after we had explained our position on water use. It was a breakthrough moment for all of us. It showed that communication would work. As a landowner, I felt validated and a little euphoric.

Some very, very smart ladies...one in the EUB, one in Shell and one in CAPP, and two smart men (can't forget the men) decided that what we were doing in these get togethers was called synergy. Synergy very simply means "working together". There was a conference planned to get these groups, and lots of other industry people together to network and begin to turn over a new page in landowner/industry relations. Since that initial conference, a number of conferences have followed and the synergy concept gathered momentum. The groups decided we needed a central body and several years ago Synergy Alberta was formed as a sort of umbrella over these diverse groups spread all over the province. Our

conferences, which are held the last week of October in Red Deer, are open to everyone to provide both learning & networking opportunities. This is a very brief look at Synergy Alberta. To learn more just ask any of us or check out our amazing website at [www.synergyalberta.ca](http://www.synergyalberta.ca).

Because synergy is working in the oil patch, I know it can be used with the Energy Literacy program. Don't get me wrong, synergy is not a panacea. There are companies who refuse to meet with these synergy groups. One company ended up in an expensive hearing and subsequently lost and one of the reasons given was the refusal to work with the local synergy group, and there are landowners who want to fight and still see it as their only option. But these are getting to be the minority.

I think the Energy Literacy mission "to promote awareness, build capacity and **engage stakeholders**" is almost perfect. Why almost perfect? I think the "engage stakeholders" should come first because I am such a synergy person that I know how well it works. We here are the first wave of stakeholders who are involved in the entire process of promoting awareness right from the start, and everyone will be building capacity together. To me it resonates with a synergistic approach.....we are planning to work together, to build a strong long term partnership. When I say work together, I mean working side by side as partners. There is a bit of ground work to be done before this working together stuff can happen in the bigger picture. I am sad to say that if the ground work is not done well, the final partnership may not be as satisfying or as effective as it could be. So ...

Let's look at attitudes first—actually negative attitudes. Negative attitudes that come to mind are: superiority, controlling, closed mindedness (my computer says that is not a word), bullying and impatience. These are not part of the framework of any positive relationship or partnership. I am sure we have all found ourselves the recipient of comments made with these attitudes. I get **right cranky** when someone pulls the superiority pose with me. I get so busy being cranky that I don't listen to the spiel. I sometimes find myself saying "Yah, But" when I am being spoken **at** by someone who is trying to control me. Again, I am so busy trying to speak to defend myself that I am not listening. But these negative attitudes can all be replaced by a one positive attitude...**Respect**.

Respect must be shown for the person, their opinions, their occupation and lifestyle and their property. I am not saying that we must agree with each other because that may never happen, but we must basically put ourselves in the other's shoes to try to understand where the avenues of communication could be opened. To me, if we **show** respect, there is a chance to **grow respect**. Someone said that is why we have two ears and one mouth. We don't generally annoy anyone when we are listening. People who speak with respect get listened to and spoken TO, if not, they get talked ABOUT. I said that to an oil company once...that if they came to the meeting we would talk to them, if they chose not to come to the meeting, we would talk about them.

We all have the right to our own opinions and, this is important to remember, we are EMOTIONALLY attached to these opinions. When someone thrashes our point of view, they thrash us emotionally. No one thinks clearly when they are smarting from a thrashing. The emotion just gets higher and higher, and nothing good can come from this situation. To earn respect, handle all points of view with respect. Agreement is not necessary, just **acknowledge and respect** their position and **open up** the communication.

In the last while I have had 2 very different meetings. The first had several participants who had left their respect somewhere else. It was a terrible experience. These individuals came in rude and belligerent and the rest of us immediately began to feel defensive. Then they maligned our organization and all the affiliates we're partnered with. We were more defensive and now felt emotionally abused. Trying to think and speak clearly in such an atmosphere is almost impossible for most of us. As the meeting progressed, these individuals would not acknowledge the chair or let anyone else speak without interrupting them. They hijacked the floor and berated those of us who could not escape their tirades (some went to the bathroom but we couldn't all go to the bathroom at the same time). Suffice it to say, there was no respect, and certainly no trust built up. Any relationship is then off track, the defensive mentality will take centre stage at any subsequent encounter, if people will even want to come.

The other meeting was a true synergy meeting with community people, lots of industry people, a couple of forestry representatives, First Nations, an ERCB rep, municipal rep, two high school students and very capable facilitator.

We actually like each other, we enjoy the teasing and banter that comes with a good relationship. We look forward to our meetings. We work together to raise the awareness of land owner rights, pipelines, road use agreements, and agricultural interaction with industry. We commiserate about the down turns in agriculture and the oil patch, comment on new ERCB directives and municipal programs and enjoy hearing what the students are up to. We trust each other's information and know that everyone can ask a question that may sound stupid and still get a respectful answer. It is a wonderful learning environment. We eat together and visit about our lives. When we see each other on the street, we make a point to acknowledge each other. I now have friends who work for the oil & gas industry. This is where the respect in synergy has taken us.

If someone says to me, "Trust me" and they haven't earned my respect, they may as well say, "Ignore me" because without my respect for you or your point of view, there is no effective communication. I know this sounds brutal, but I really believe it. To accomplish the mission: "to promote awareness, build capacity and engage stakeholders in the advancement of energy literacy in Alberta", the first baby step is to **show** respect for all the stakeholders and work to **earn** respect from all the stakeholders. This respect will allow trust to grow.

Trust opens the communication channels, dialogue becomes comfortable and new information can be discussed in a non confrontational atmosphere. All opinions and points of view can be openly discussed with no fear of criticism or disrespect. We may not agree but we can keep talking. This is synergy at work.

As I see it, the urbanite's message will be quite different to that for the ruralite's (another word my computer does not like). Although we rural folk are much fewer in number, it appears to me that most of the infrastructure for any energy will not be in the city streets. It will neighbour the farmers and ranchers, the hamlets and villages, the acreage owners, the recreation areas, the trap lines, the hunting camps and the tourist destinations.

Probably many of you own a piece of land whether it is a condo lot, a house yard, acreage, or a quarter section or more. I know how hard we worked to pay for our farm land and I'm sure, unless you won the lottery that you worked equally as hard. We have an emotional attachment to our piece of land. It is ours! Now you are wondering where in heck I am going with this.

Well, imagine, if you will, your piece of land. An energy company approaches you, and after the required negotiations, there is an access road and an oil rig in the middle of your land (They do like the middle). This piece of land is now leased to the oil company for the duration of that well....possibly 30 or more years. When the well is a good one, there is an installation, and a pipeline and possibly a power line to add to the lease and the road. You were compensated but now you must work around these facilities and **all** your future development plans must take these structures into consideration. There are various setbacks for pipelines and installations. Nothing can be built over a pipeline and depending upon what is in the pipeline, several metres on either side as well. So this land is now shared. Next a company plans several gas wells and subsequent pipelines on your land. You will be compensated and they do leave a much smaller footprint, but they must now be considered in all your future planning. Again the set backs must be considered for any development. A couple of power line towers are slated for your land, but they will just cross the far corner and you will be compensated for them but again they must be worked around and considered for any future plans. I hope you are not situated near a river with a dam planned as you would be required to forfeit your entire property. After all, the power generated by the dam will benefit hundreds of thousands and there may be only a few families who lose their land. But, you will be compensated for your loss.

This little exercise is simply to illustrate that rural Alberta is very aware of energy requirements needed to support the affluence of Alberta.

Trust and the truth make for strong, healthy relationships.

The truth has to trump the fear mongers, the scare technicians and any sensation hunting media. Once the truth is well known, the facts will defuse these "frightening" scenarios. Get the truth, the facts, the transparency out to the public, the media, everyone. It is so amazing to watch a sensational story deflate with the introduction of a bit of factual reality. The truth will win but only if it is well known and available to all. Making sure that there are no gaps in the information that would lead people to think they had been "spin doctored" is so important. That would increase the cynicism, damage the respect and destroy the trust.

Remember that respect grows trust and conversely disrespect grows distrust. All the work that needs to be done to advance Energy Literacy must be done with Respect. It will be the quickest way, the straightest way, and the most satisfactory way.

We must be respectful of what people know, what they don't know and most importantly what they **think** they know.

We need confidence that the message will be carried with respect and received with trust. That is the job.

So, trust must be cultivated between all stakeholders, the message must be easily seen as the truth, all the facts must be easily accessible, questions and concerns must be addressed honestly in communication channels that are wide open and it all starts with **Respect**.