

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

The Discussion Leader's Role in Public Issue Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision-Making

Volume 6

STRATEGIES FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING PROCESS DESIGN

Below is a list of process design questions that may prove helpful. Answers to these questions should be written into a formal convening document that includes all process protocols. The first order of business then, would be for the newly constituted group to review the convening document and modify it as necessary.

- What is the purpose of the effort?
- What are the ultimate results of the process (goals, plans, strategies, policies, etc...)?
- What is the time frame for the process? Are there intermediate deadlines? Are deadlines flexible?
- How are the participants to be invited/selected?
- Will the stakeholders participate as individuals or as teams?
- What are the roles of the participants? Will someone act as chair? Recorder?
- Who will manage the process? Who will run the meetings?
- How will information be communicated between meetings?
- What problem-solving strategies will be used in each stage of the process?
- Will issues be dealt with sequentially or all at once?
- How will new issues be dealt with?
- What data and information is needed?
- Will the group need to make decisions about what data/information to use and what will and will not be used?
- When will the meetings be held? How long will they run?
- Where will the meetings be held?
- Will the meetings be open to the public?
- How will the process be communicated to the public?
- How will they be kept informed?
- How should the media be involved?

WAYS TO STRUCTURE A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The organization of consensus programs varies from project to project and community to community. A preferred process structure for any given issue is dependent on the following variables:

- The degree of technicality and complexity inherent in the issue
- Time constraints
- The level of interest by citizens of the community
- Level of conflict

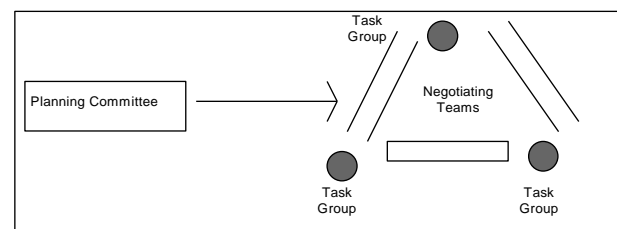
The four basic models for structuring a process that will be presented have emerged from the study of hundreds of successful programs. Models are listed in order from least citizen involvement to most citizen involvement.

Negotiating Teams

Representatives in a consensus program can be organized into teams. Each team decides on its goals and interests, and functions as a unit during problem solving sessions. Negotiating teams work well when the number of teams is small - three to five is a reasonable number - and when each team has well-defined and compatible interests.

Team members need time between sessions to talk among themselves about how to proceed, and time to go back to their respective constituents to discuss the progress of the discussion and to seek input from other people not at the table.

Negotiating teams can also choose to use smaller working groups to explore an issue in depth, develop and refine options, develop written agreements and iron out differences. Working groups can include representatives from each team, or their membership may be expanded to include non-team individuals.

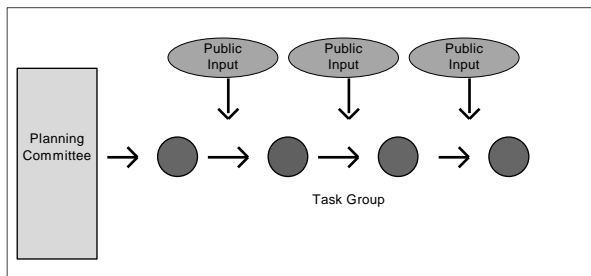


Negotiating Teams

Task Group and Public Input Model

The Task Group and Public Input model has an 8 - 15 person task group that identifies issues and alternatives, evaluates alternatives and makes choices. It does so by actively seeking public input from interested persons and interest groups at every step of the process. This model is often used to address highly technical issues or complex legislative drafting tasks that require a small group with a consistent membership.

Typically, the task groups solicit public input to identify issues, to offer alternatives and to evaluate draft recommendations. Public input can be in the form of workshops, town meetings or public hearings and is often focused on a specific task.



Task Group and Public Input Model

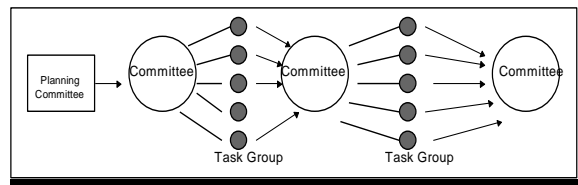
Committee and Task Groups

The most commonly used model for structuring a community consensus-building process is a committee combined with task groups or subcommittees. The committee may have anywhere from 10 to 60 members who represent the different interest groups concerned about a problem. The committee agrees on procedures, identifies issues, gathers information, generates options and develops recommendations or seeks agreements. The larger the committee, the greater the reliance on task groups for dealing with substantive issues.

Task groups are established by the committee to gather information on specific issues, to identify related concerns or to develop alternative strategies to solve a problem. Task groups broaden participation and expand resources available to the program. Task groups can be organized around substantive topics - such as education or housing - identified by the larger committee, or they can be set up to cover geographic areas such as neighborhoods. Task

groups should not be organized so that they represent homogeneous interests that will approach the committee with competing and contradictory recommendations. Individuals invited to join a task group contribute their expertise and experience on a specific topic without having to invest the time to participate in the larger program. Task groups report their results to the committee.

The committee may use one of the task groups to help it research information and identify issues to be addressed, and then establish a new task group to help it generate solutions. Or, a committee may retain the same task group through an entire process. A committee should be large enough to permit the representation of different interests and small enough to make decisions.



Committee and Task Group Model

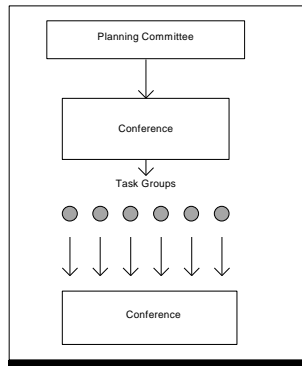
Conference and Task Groups

The third model features a large conference that convenes interested citizens around a community problem, followed by task group work and later by additional conferences. A conference may be open to any citizen or may be attended only by invited citizens. The advantage of a conference model is that it enables many more people to become involved in a face-to-face program which can increase the opportunities for participation and build momentum.

Conferences are a good forum for providing information, identifying issues and concerns and gathering suggestions for alternative solutions. Conferences are not, however, a good format for achieving consensus agreements.

Conferences generally identify issues that become the basis for organizing working groups. The composition of working groups can be by self-selection, or groups can be formed by a program's steering committee. Conference working groups report their results to a second conference usually held six to twelve months later. Participants at this conference discuss working group reports and proposals, and then suggest future directions for the program, including tasks of the same or new working

groups. Additional conferences are held as needed.



Conference and Task Group Model

Some public involvement is almost always desired. In some situations, significant public involvement is the key to success. Although involving a wider public may require more planning and resources, always err on the side of openness. Excluding interested stakeholders from decision making can often mean disaster.

TECHNIQUES FOR CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

There are many different tools for involving the primary and secondary stakeholders in a consensus-building process. The following list provides a quick overview of several common approaches. Feel free to invent your own.

- Charettes
- Public Hearings
- Community Meetings
- Referenda
- Focus Groups
- Team Building
- Hotlines
- Workshops
- Interviews
- Written Comments
- Polls and Surveys

Charettes

A charette is used to bring together a group of stakeholders for an intense session(s) to work through issues. Charettes are often scheduled for an entire weekend or other lengthier periods and require participation during the entire event. They are often used for working on issues that are best represented visually such as site plans or building designs. Substantial staff support is often required to ensure success and they can be expensive since the host agency may pay for lodging and food. It also may be difficult to get key decisions makers to charettes because of the substantial time commitment required. Charettes can be conducted in a "fishbowl" to

allow the greater public the opportunity to observe the work in progress.

Community Meetings

Community meetings include any type of venue that brings citizens together on a particular issue. Since community meetings vary widely, it is essential to clearly communicate expectations for the meeting (many people who attend community meetings expect a public hearing). Community meetings, which can be large or small, are used to:

- (a) educate the public,
- (b) seek input from the public,
- (c) seek a reaction from the public, and
- (d) make decisions.

Large meetings, or meetings that are likely to generate significant controversy, may often benefit from a skilled facilitator.

Community meetings often differ from public hearings in that the communication is multiway. They can be used to promote lateral conversations. Large community meetings are commonly broken into smaller groups in order to increase the amount of "air" time available to each person.

Focus Groups/Community Dialogs

Focus groups have been used by market research experts for decades to assess consumer reaction to particular products, services or messages. They have been adapted in recent years for use with citizens on public issues. In a focus group, a small group of people is brought together in a confidential setting to discuss an issue with the assistance of a skilled facilitator. The facilitator usually establishes the tone for the meeting and initiates the conversation.

Conversation is encouraged between members of the focus group rather than with the facilitator. A video or audio tape is kept of the proceedings. The content of conversation is analyzed to assess how people frame the issues, whether any words stimulate a strong reaction, whether any solutions emerge and to gauge the strength of interest in the issues or any particular outcome.

Hotlines

Hotlines are still used when a large number of people may seek to provide their input on a

particular subject. They are especially appropriate when the stakeholder community is geographically dispersed. New technologies allow callers to either receive recorded information or reach a human voice by pushing buttons on the telephone. Systems that are designed to allow callers to reach a human should be actively staffed and clearly publicized.

Interviews

Interviews are often used to quickly gather detailed information from a diversity of perspectives on a specific issue. They can be used to ascertain perspectives on how citizens might be engaged in a public involvement process and/or on specific issues. Staff or consultants can be used to conduct the interviews. Information gathered from the interviews is often kept confidential or is distributed without attribution. Since interviews are usually limited to a small number of people, they may not be representative of the broad public. The nature of the interviewing process does not allow conversation between adversaries and may encourage people to harden their positions.

Polls and Surveys

Polls and surveys, like interviews, can be used to quickly gauge public sentiment. Although they can be very expensive, polls and surveys can help establish areas of concern, issues of public importance and potential issue reframing. In order to be properly developed, administered, and evaluated, polls and surveys require individuals with significant expertise.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are usually formal meetings with specific notice requirements where members of the public are asked to provide input or react to proposals. They are the most commonly used form of public involvement technique and the one most abused: Public agencies often use public hearings rather than thinking through a tailored citizen involvement program while activists use public hearings for guerrilla theater and media shows. Public hearings can be used to augment citizen involvement techniques that involve small numbers of the interested public, or

in conjunction with activities that promote lateral conversations.

Referenda and Ballot Initiatives

In some parts of the country, referenda are widely used to gain the broadest possible public involvement. The results may be advisory or binding, depending on the nature of the issue. In Virginia, public balloting on issues is largely restricted to public consent for changes in taxation or issuance of bonds. When binding, they represent ultimate sharing of decision-making with the public. Referenda tend to be an expensive form of public involvement.

Team Building Activities

While most citizen involvement activities are clearly designed to focus the attention of the public on a particular substantive task, a fixed membership group may decide to clarify and strengthen its relationships through focused activities. Team building exercises are generally led by a person who specializes in these events. One of the typical strategies is to move the participants from their regular environment as the first step toward restructuring and improving relationships. Outdoor courses, adult retreat sites and hikes are typical focal points.

Workshops

Specific, task-focused, hands-on meetings are often used to bring a working group together to tackle an issue. Workshops are often used when a task involves some level of physical planning such as siting, design or circulation. They are often very successful because they encourage participants to share their ideas on how to make a project work. They can become colossal failures, however, when used to engage stakeholders in the design of a project that they do not want built.

Written Comments

Used more at the federal level than at the state or local government level, requests for written comment are a familiar and precise way of getting detailed review of complex and technical proposals. Where resources are limited, it may also be one of the least expensive forms of public involvement.

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