

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

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

Volume 7

CONVENING A GROUP

REFRAMING THE ISSUE: Moving From Positions to Interests

In problem solving, the term “reframing” refers to directing a party's attention away from positions and toward the task of identifying interests, inventing options, and discussing criteria for selecting an option. Public issues can be reframed to increase the level of abstraction and bring diverse interests to the table. Issues framed in an “either/or” context often attract only those people who hold polar positions.

Framing Can Invite Conflict

How an issue is initially framed will greatly affect each party's problem solving perspectives and level of conflict. Many community issues are initially framed as a debate. One of the most powerful ways of redirecting perspectives is to frame or reframe the initial issue. Consider the following example in which the parties are forced into a bipolar perspective:

Do present development practices along North Carolina barrier islands help or harm our island environment?

Reframing to Reduce Conflict

Once interests are known, an issue may be reframed to reflect each party's key interests, thus helping to move attention away from each party's position. Reframing an issue involves finding a common definition of the issue that is acceptable to all parties and can be achieved by substituting the initial “closed-ended” question with an “open-ended” question.

Reframing must also reflect the key interests of the parties who are affected by, or can affect, the issue. By substituting a “How to...” question for a “Should we...” question, disputants are moved from debating the relative merits of their positions to focusing on a collaborative problem solving venture.

Reframing a public issue for collaborative problem solving will require a working knowledge of all interests. By reflecting the key interests of the disputants, a reframed issue encourages collaboration and signals what must be satisfied if the issue is to be resolved.

Consider the following reframing of the issue given above:

How can we achieve the economic development potential of North Carolina barrier islands while preserving and protecting the island environments?

How would you reframe the following potentially contentious public issues?

- Should we consolidate our city and county school systems?
- Should we have county-wide zoning?
- Should commercial hog operations be required to use more advanced waste treatment processes?

Note: All issues are not amenable to Collaborative Problem Solving

You will discover, when exploring some issues, that the parties will not agree to reframe the issue. If an issue cannot be reframed from a “should we...” question to a “how can we...” question, the issue may very likely not be a candidate for collaborative problem solving. Issues that focus primarily on basic differences in values or rights cannot easily be reframed. Such issues may better be resolved in other forums such as the legislature or courts.

AN INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CONVENERS

A pre-meeting interview is an important step in convening a group of stakeholders in a collaborative process. When convening the process, we often begin with a theory of the conflict in mind. The interview provides the convener with important information on the validity of that theory, and an opportunity to properly structure the process.

A pre-meeting interview should always begin with an introduction, information about yourself and your organization (if applicable), and your role as convener. Next you should provide the participant with a brief description of the collaborative process that you anticipate will unfold including your understanding of the desired outcome (such as a negotiated agreement). You should also tell the participant the names and organizations of other people that you will be contacting.

The following is a list of questions to help you structure your interview:

- Before we begin, do you have any questions to ask me first?
- What are your interests or concerns about this particular issue?
- Is your group willing to participate in the process I described? (if no) What will it take for you or your group to participate?
- Who can or should represent your group or constituency?
- What would you need to see, in advance, to commit to working towards resolution of this issue?
- Should you participate, what would you consider a successful outcome of the group?
- Do you have any concerns about participating in this group? What can we as facilitators do to overcome them?
- Who needs to be there from other stakeholder groups?
- What are your alternatives to participation?
- What about others? What if they aren't there?
- What data do we need to bring to the table? Who, when, and by whom should data be presented?
- What ground rules would you like?
- Is there anything I haven't asked you or that you would like to say?

BLUEPRINT FOR A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Your process is designed when you are able to describe the following in some detail:

- **Who the participants will be.** If it is premature to name names, categories of participants are necessary because they help define the group dynamics. It is also important to know who will select the participants.
- **What the participants will be asked to do.** Include role descriptions, scope, and depth.
- **How decisions will be made.** If you expect consensus, you must state it.
- **The nature of the final product.** Do you expect agreement, a contract, a plan, a regulation or a vision?
- **Duration.** Timelines, milestones, and deadlines will help define the process. They should be realistic and not so abbreviated that participants immediately move to a crisis mode.
- **The authority of the group.** Failure to be clear about the level of shared decision making can doom a group to failure at the point conflict emerges.
- **The stage of the policy process this group is serving.** Are they framing the problem, identifying options, developing solutions or implementing agreements?
- **The cost of the process.** Will staff time be used to support the process? Will a facilitator or mediator be hired? What technical studies might be needed?
- **Meeting protocols and ground rules.** The presence of these documents can provide symbolic evidence of the type of process you are using. Their detail will provide important guidance to primary stakeholders.

A STANDARD MEETING PLAN

When a group of stakeholders convenes to address a public dispute, it should develop a standard meeting plan, or written outline, of what it intends to accomplish. The meeting plan should contain the following elements (text in ***bold italic*** are examples of 'boiler plate' language that may be used in any meeting plan):

Background

Provides a summary overview of the issue, including the events that have lead up to the meeting.

Purpose

Explains why the group has convened and what it intends to accomplish.

Nature of the Final Product

Describes the type of product (such as a written report) the group will produce.

Stakeholder Groups and Participants

Lists the individuals that will participate in the collaborative problem solving process.

Constituent Representation

Describes the interests that each participant is expected to represent - ***Individuals should keep constituents informed through aggressive and active, but informal, means using materials such as meeting minutes and flip chart summaries.***

Role of Working Group Members

- **Attendance** - States that each participant will be expected to attend and fully participate in all meetings - ***In the event that a participant is not able to attend, he/she should become informed of all activities and decisions made at that particular meeting.***

- **Preparation for Meetings** - States that participants should read all appropriate materials and arrive prepared to work.

Role of the Facilitator

Describes the responsibilities of the facilitator during, and outside of, the meeting.

Decision Process

- **Use of Consensus** - Indicates that the group will operate by consensus and that group decisions will be made only with concurrence of all participants represented at the meeting.
- **Failure to Reach Consensus** - Defines back-up procedures, such as a minority report, if group fails to reach consensus.
- **Agendas** - Identifies who is responsible and how they will be drafted.
- **Meeting Summaries** - Identifies how meeting summaries will be prepared and distributed.

Ground Rules for Interaction

Lists the rules that will be followed during meetings.

Enforcement of Ground Rules

Describes how rules will be monitored and enforced.

Input From and Information to the Public

Identifies how the public will be informed, if meetings will be open to the public and how the group will interact with the media.

Schedule and Duration

Describes how often the group will meet, how long meetings will be and when the group intends to complete its work.

Amendments to the Charter

Describes how the charter can be amended by the working group

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